THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE

MULK RAJ ANAND

By the same Author

Fiction

UNTOUCHABLE

COOLIE

TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

THE VILLAGE

ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS

THE BARBER'S TRADE UNION AND OTHER STORIES

THE BIG HEART

THE TRACTOR AND THE CORN GODDESS

SEVEN SUMMERS

PRIVATE LIFE OF AN INDIAN PRINCE

REFLECTIONS ON THE GOLDEN BED AND OTHER STORIES

THE OLD WOMAN AND THE COW

Essays

PERSIAN PAINTING

THE HINDU VIEW OF ART

THE GOLDEN BREATH

THE BRIDE'S BOOK OF BEAUTY
(*In collaboration with* Krishna Hutheesing)

APOLOGY FOR HEROISM

HOMAGE TO TAGORE

LINES WRITTEN TO AN INDIAN AIR

ON EDUCATION

KING-EMPEROR'S ENGLISH

For Children

THE STORY OF INDIA

THE STORY OF MAN

INDIAN FAIRY TALES

THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE

A Novel

by

MULK RAJ ANAND

The sword sang on the barren heath,
The sickle in the fruitful field:
The sword he sung a song of death,
But could not make the sickle yield

William Blake
from Gnomic Verses—Merlin's Prophecy.

KUTUB PUBLISHERS LTD.
BOMBAY

To

SAJJAD ZAHEER

I

'AWAKE, brother, awake!'

Lal Singh heard a faint voice and felt a timid pressure on the big toe of his left foot as he lay on the luggage rack in a third-class compartment of the Bombay-Peshawar mail, which was speeding through the Punjab.

'Acha, what time is it?' he said, rather startled as he came to and rubbed his eyes.

'Dawntime, — must be about five o'clock,' the man said. 'Your destination, Lahore cantonment, is the next stop.'

Lalu turned on his side and lay there, impassive, smacking his tongue to swallow the stale taste of the night in his mouth, and contemplated the hundreds of mosquitoes and moths buzzing round the glass globe on the gas jet which mocked at the filtering light of the warm spring morning. Then he sniffed at the close, congested atmosphere, wiped the sweat off his neck, raised himself to a sitting position, careful not to bump against the iron rifle racks provided in all carriages by the Sarkar for emergency purposes, put on his light canvas shoes and descended from his perch to get ready to alight at Lahore cantonment, where the debarkation office at Bombay had booked him.

'So even the trains are running much faster in India since I left home to go to the war,' he said by way of starting a conversation, as he scratched his head.

The other passengers, who were whispering prayers to themselves or talking in low tones to each other, stared at him.

Blackened by long journeyings, filthy and begrimed in his coarse khaki shirt and shorts, with his huge hairy legs bare except for the socks rolled round his ankles, with short black hair sprouting all over his closely cropped head and face like hundreds of little ants, spat out of the war, he looked like some wild man who had just crawled out of a cave in the earth, a strange enough spectacle even in post-war India which had seen stranger apparitions and deformities. His European-style clothes were familiar

enough because most Babus sported kot-pataloons and stiff collars nowadays; but it was the closely cropped hair, the stiff neck and the general air of a gaunt, bald, shapeless, cumbersome ape, which life in Germany, as a war prisoner, and then in England had given him, that aroused the curiosity of the lean, flimsilyclad crouching passengers squeezed against each other in the carriage.

'Sleep or wake at your own pleasure,' he said to himself, mocking the passengers for their reticence.

Then he took a little bag from his strange-looking, greasy knapsack, fished out a mirror and looked at the reflection of himself, passing his hand over his beard, making funny faces like a monkey to see if he needed a shave. He decided to wait till he got to his destination and began to assemble his things. Having done that, he lit a cigarette and made another effort at conversation:

'There is a land,' he said in a broad significant whisper, 'where people would rather put their sacks and their steel trunks and their bedsteads on the upper bunks and sit on the floor than snatch a few hours' sleep, and that land is — Hindustan!'

But the passengers, ordinarily, talkative enough, ignored his remark, only scowling at him, as if they considered it sacriligious for anyone to disturb the sacred peace of the dawn.

Lalu began to peer out of the window.

The earth of Central Punjab lay flat, upturned in patches and still green, though the tall grasses by the telegraph poles in the moates were already singed by the fire of spring suns; and, beyond the vast stretches of the fields, the lower offshoots of the Himalayas were ochre-coloured in the distant haze.

'Nearing home,' he said to himself as he recognized the familiar landscape. But at the thought of home he felt afraid, afraid of he knew not what. . . .

The Frontier Mail flashed past Atari station. The old village, associated with the name of one of the Generals of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, lion of the Punjab, who ruled before the English came, stood, with the spires of Atari-wallah's castle broken where before the war they had been crumbling. Lalu warmed to see the familiar places. They were the same yet somehow different. He did not know what had happened

during his absence. He felt an utter stranger, a foreigner, a freak like a Hooi Sipi from Ladakh or a Nepalese bear.

'What be your caste, brother?' asked the man who had awakened him.

'I come from a land called Hindustan,' said Lalu mischievously. 'Perhaps you have heard of this land: very hot in the summer, very cold in the winter, and full of strange owls like me.'

'But what is your religion, brother, what is your caste?' the man said simply, though he couldn't help smiling at Lalu's singular way of answering questions.

The previous evening when this passenger had boarded the train at Muttra with his wife, who now sat huddled in a corner, he had, with the characteristic informality of fellow-travellers in a third-class Indian railway compartment, asked Lalu his name, his father's name and the names of his forefathers for five generations. But he had omitted his inquiry about caste, presuming him to be a Sikh from his name. And now, he had perhaps suddenly remembered that the species of two-legged animals called Sikhs wore long hair, so he was trying to make sure, though to what purpose Lalu did dot know. Maybe he was just making up for the lost time during which he had ignored him, or maybe he had been saying prayers, and was now reverting back to the informal bonhomie of the homeland.

'I have no religion or caste,' Lalu said, 'since I have been in Vilayat for some years among beef- and pig-eating Sahibs....'

'Ram! Ram! Ram! Sri! Sri!' the man exclaimed to God, conventionally. Apparently he was an orthodox Brahmin.

'Ah, have you been in Vilayat, then?' said a Muhammadan dressed in a grubby pair of white drill trousers, an open shirt and a Fez. He had a fly-killer under his arm and the loose pages of an Urdu paper called *Zemindar* were spread before him. 'Tell me what this son of the heathen, Curzon, is up to? And what do they feel about the restoration of the Khilafat to Turkey? Now that we Mussalmans and Hindus are one, these English had better look out for themselves.'

'I forgot to call on Lord Curzon while I was in England,' Lalu mocked. 'But I don't know if you have ever heard of a man called Barkat Ullah. He is a Muslim leader in Germany,

who exerted the whole force of his buttocks to bring back Sultan Abdul Hamid to the throne of Turkey. But the Turks are so ungrateful, they wouldn't have the Sultan. I hear they harbour some irreverent notions about religion!'

'This is strange,' said the Muhammadan, who had made himself look like the son of Anwar Pasha himself. 'So our Khilafat movement is doomed. If only Amir Amanullah had continued his invasion of this country last year; that might have developed into a holy war. . . .'

'Oh, ji, why do you ask, the whole cause of our Bharat Mata is doomed!' said a Hindu merchant in muslin, with a black boat-cap on his head. 'The Sarkar has bled this country white, as Gandhi Mahatma says. Now think of it, my Uncle's firm has been wanting some forty thousand rupees capital to start a cotton mill near Cheharta there, but the banks will not give us the money! . . . And, after the way Dyer shot down our boys, too, in Jallianwallah Bagh, without a warning. And the humiliations the Sarkar cast upon respectable people in the streets of Amritsar by making them crawl on their bellies! All because we protested against the ban on four people meeting together in a street.'

'Oh, brother, you talk of forty thousand,' said a Sikh peasant in coarse homespuns, who wore a thick amulet on his arm and had a huge watch with a thick nickel chain adjusted to his tunic. 'There is famine for petty cash in the country. Times are very bad . . . An evil Sarkar.'

Lalu had heard about the Amritsar shooting, of the Afghan invasion and a great many other happenings from Barkat Ullah, the seditionist, in Germany, but he had not heard about the famine of petty cash. Now that the talk had turned serious he abandoned the mockery in his tone.

'I am with you, brothers,' he said, 'only I have eaten the salt of the Sarkar, bad as it is; I have been a war prisoner in Germany and I am going to the depot to get a rise in pay and rank for my war services.'

'So you have been to the war,' said the Muhammadan Babu.

'The brother has just come back,' the Brahmin informed him sympathetically.

'A prisoner?' said the Hindu merchant.

'Not for stealing anything,' Lalu said with an irrepressible irony.

'So you fought in battle like a Sikh Surma!' complimented the peasant with a resurgence of the military ardour which had not been suppressed by hard toil or bad times.

'Yes,' said Lalu.

'And were you not wounded?' the Hindu merchant asked.

'Slightly, in the thigh here.' And he showed a scar.

'It was a narrow escape,' said the merchant, smacking his lips. 'For it might have been another part of your body. . . . The body of the son of the Chaudhri of our bazaar was like a sieve when we found him in the Jallianwalla Bagh . . .'

'It is all the same,' Lalu said, affecting a casual air.

Conversation lapsed for a moment. Lalu whistled, then sat silent, his face contorted into a set, impassive expression. Then he turned to the window with a far-away look in his eyes . . . The war was over and though it did not happen in India, it seemed, from the talk of these people, to have happened to India. And, what was more, from all this unrest and shooting and what not it hadn't quite finished yet. . . . Something in his soul cried out with the dead, for the dead, as if he were the ghost of himself, left behind, unhoused and quite detached from everyone, an utter stranger. He did not know what lay in store for him. And he felt afraid again and shrank back into himself . . .

'Are you married, brother?' the pilgrim from Muttra said.

'I had a German girl,' Lalu answered.

'Ram re Ram! brother, a Christian woman, a white woman!' the pilgrim exclaimed. 'They eat beef and are immoral!'

'She went with you without marriage?' asked the man, who seemed to imagine himself as the son of Anwar Pasha, lasciviously.

'When a man and woman agree, what need is there for the priest?' Lalu quoted the Muhammadan proverb.

'Ram! Sri!' the Brahmin pilgrim began to intone invocations to the deity.

'God forbid!' said the Muhammadan.

'I hear there is such an excess of women left over in Vilayat after the death of lakhs of men that they are shipping over a

great many mems to Karachi to be distributed among the peasants,' said the Sikh peasant.

'That is true, brother,' said Lalu with a smile. 'You will like them. These memnies are naked in love, and, unlike our Indian women, unashamed . . .'

'I have a daughter,' said the pilgrim, 'and it is difficult to find a husband for her because nowadays the boys ask so much money in dowry in advance . . .' And he began to wash his hands, spilling water all over his face from a little brass jug, filling his mouth, gargling and spitting on the wooden floor, the tuft knot on his head shaking up and down.

'In the towns,' said the Hindu Lalla, 'it is the other way round. The parents of girls are asking fabulous prices for their daughters . . .'

'I might have brought my memni with me,' said Lalu with a laugh, 'if I had known that things are as bad as this at home.'

'Let us see your fate,' said the pilgrim, wiping his hands on his loin cloth. 'Let us see who the scroll of your life tallies with. Perhaps my daughter may meet her mate in you . . .'

'Ooon, hoon . . .' his wife, who was huddled up in the corner, was saying even as she poured some tea from a thermos-flask into the cup on its top.

'The lady of your house is talking to you,' the peasant reminded the busy pilgrim.

'Take, brother, you take it,' the pilgrim said to Lalu.

Lalu was surprised at the offer. What had happened to the man's orthodoxy. And what a miraculous change that the man, who was apparently a Brahmin, was offering his daughter in marriage to a stranger. He took the tea and began to gulp it as he held the metal cup in one hand and he yielded the palm of the other to the Brahmin.

'Never do anything without the blessings of your parents,' the man began to say. 'For a son is thrice blessed who reveres his father and mother.'

'You were going to see his destiny,' the peasant urged.

'My destiny is in that cantonment,' Lalu said suddenly at the sight of some uniformed sappers and miners, who were rubbing down mules by the barracks. And he withdrew his

hand and began to harness himself with his knapsack in readiness for his departure.

He pursued his destiny across the platform of Moghalpura, Lahore Cantonment Station, into the yard.

A number of Sikh taxi-drivers jumped up from the footboards of their Ford cars shouting 'Sahib, Sahib, taxi, Huzoor,' to a military officer who was about the only other passenger who had alighted at the station from the Mail besides Lal Singh. Then some tonga-wallahs ran up to the Englishman, belatedly trying to outbid the taxi-drivers, and Lalu began to stroll away sheepishly because no one had offered him the hire of a carriage.

'I must look strange,' he muttered to himself. Since his stay in Vilayat he had begun to take the dignity of his person, dressed in European clothes, for granted; and, unmindful of the fact that his dress, though English style, was grimy, and that his presence, though trimmed to a Germanic shape, looked odd, he was surprised that he was being neglected, specially as he had money in his pocket, left over from the travelling allowance which the Sarkar had given him at Bombay. But the Indian drivers were quick to judge the status of a person from his clothes and appearance.

As if to assert his Sahibhood for the last time, since he knew he would be an ordinary sepoy soon, he jumped into a car and asked the driver to take him to the barracks of the 69th Rifles. The driver looked at him for a moment, surreptitiously, shading his eyes against the imaginary glare of the sun to see who this pumpkin-headed, dirty imitation Sahib could be, and said, 'One Rupee!' as if this exorbitant rate of hire would frighten him. But Lalu assumed the superior manner of a grandee and ordered shortly, almost peremptorily: 'Did you hear, 69th Rifles!'

The driver cast a last glance as the stray, armed, thick-necked presence of his would-be passenger and, as if he were hypnotized, meekly crawled into his seat and started off.

The car swung round the brief Railway Bazaar, past the greasy old cookshop, which flaunted its tawdry array of badly-chipped china cups and saucers and spoutless tea-pots, under the grand title of 'Moghalpura Hotel and Restaurant' on a large

painted iron board across its façade, past the 'Prince of Wales Hairdressing and Shaving Saloon,' with its huge, freckled mirror, past the 'Shah Din Civil and Military Tailors' sprawled on a low board above the noisy racket of Singer sewing machines, into a well-paved road. On one side of this some coolies were uncoiling electric cables from tall pylons, while on the other side builders were busy extending the yards of the sooty railway loco-shops which had grown up since the war.

Further, the sun was shining on the tiled roof of the new brick barracks across the Grand Trunk Road, while groups of sparrows were chirping about on the mouths of the guns of the Royal Artillery.

Lalu drank deeply of the nimble breeze which drifted through the casuarina trees, while the taxi-driver, true to the instinct of his profession, lost himself in the maze of red gravel roads in the barracks, and then, skirting right round to another edge of the Grand Trunk Road, came to a standstill by the 'Quarter Guard' of the 69th Rifles.

'I am a prisoner just come back from jail,' Lalu said to the sepoy on sentry-go smilingly, after he had discharged the taxi-driver with a generous tip. Then, in case the sentry should stupidly take him at his word, he added, 'a war prisoner.'

The Ford nearly dived into a ditch as the driver turned back to have another look at the horror he had transported.

And the sentry looked him up and down suspiciously, even as he brought his rifle off the shoulder with the automatic movements of one obeying an imaginary N.C.O.'s orders, his head erect, his eyes straight.

'I am sepoy Lal Singh of Number 2 company.' Lalu volunteered the information while the sentry was executing the ritual of the wooden soldier. And he flourished his papers across the sepoy's nose with a deliberate mischief.

The sentry contemplated the papers with an uncomprehending look, trying to work himself into an alert position since it was his duty to be on the look-out for possible miscreants, agitators and seditionists, an increasing number of whom were said by the Sarkar to be insinuating themselves into army camps to incite the sepoys to mutiny.

'Where is Number 2 Company?' Lalu asked authoritatively, and frowned at the delay.

Dumb-faced, the sepoy directed him towards a barrack with a gesture of his left arm, made as if to speak and turned towards the guardroom to call the N.C.O. in charge, but, finding the Havildar and the other sepoys clustered round the hookah, reverted to the erect stance of duty.

Sepoy Lal Singh walked across the parade-ground, which was already full of squads of soldiers drilling to the shrill accents of the N.C.O.s. Apparently they seemed to be the same khaki-clad men performing the same movements which he had learnt to perform five years ago, but they were different and new because he could not recognize even one old comrade among them. Their stand-sit, stand-walk, chest forward movements seemed like the tricks of a juggler's monkeys, off the main street of a town, after the barbarous, ape-like crashing and shouting and charging in the jungle of the Flanders-trenches, a strangely exciting and ridiculous scene. And he felt as if he who had suddenly awakened from a long nightmare when he had been made prisoner had, after many a sober morning, again begun to live through a fantastic dream, though the morning sun was shining ahead of him on the flat, ordinary earth of India.

Walking up to Number 2 Company's barracks, which was the second row of improvised long wooden huts from the parade ground, he looked about for someone so that he could inquire who the N.C.O. in charge was. But only a crow cawed over a sprinkling of stale lentils by the kitchen and there was no one in sight. Apparently the company was out on parade.

He went up to peer into the kitchen, imagining that old Santu, the cook, might be there. But there was a strange, shrivelled-up old man kneading the dough. So he returned, just too late to halt an office orderly who was whirring past on a bicycle.

Then he heard someone chopping wood at the other end of the kitchen and hastened there.

'Can I see the Havildar?' he said to the tall black man who was sweating as he struck the axe hard on a boulder.

At first the man was too preoccupied and deafened by the

sound of his axe to heed him. Then he shouted, 'Oh, get away, or the axe-head will fly at you!'

Lalu stood with loins girded. The man stopped chopping the wood and mopped the sweat off his brow.

'Is there a Havildar here?' Lalu said.

'Which Havildar? — the one with a beard or one with the moustache?'

Lalu tried to recall the names of the junior-most sepoys in the regiment who could by now have become N.C O.'s. Then he said:

'When I knew him he wore neither a beard nor a moustache, no, nor even a tuft knot, but he had earned the right to be a Havildar because he was a distant cousin of the Subedar Major Sahib — I mean the sepoy Devi Singh.'

'No one of that name here!' the man answered.

'Old Bhartu — he had no moustache or beard, but a pedigree?' Lalu teased. 'Is he about?'

'No,' the man replied, irritated by the heat, a fly, and the mockery in Lalu's voice. 'Are you sure you want Number 2 Company?'

'Yes,' said Lalu, and suddenly ventured: 'Is cook Santu about or has he, too, won the Victoria Cross?'

'I shall take you to the "quarter guard" if you don't talk straight,' said the man. 'How could a cook win the Victoria Cross when I, who am a Havildar, only won a Distinguished Service Medal? . . . There used to be a man of that name in the old regiment, but he is said to have died of a splinter in his ribs in Phalanders while we were in Egypt. Subedar Subah Singh Bahadur and Jemadar Lok Nath, who came over from France to join us in Sinai, used to tell us about his lazy habits. We have an old man now who comes from Kangra. . . .'

'Oh, so Subah Singh and Lok Nath are still in the regiment?' Lalu asked. 'I wonder how long are their moustaches and beards?'

'Why — what is your game?' the man asked, looking accusingly at Lalu. 'What block-head insolence? For the matter of that it is an order that all officers should keep moustaches!

And I have one! So have Subedar Sahib and the Jemadar Sahib.'

'And Babu Khushi Ram? — I suppose he has still got his tail between his legs?' Lalu said.

At this the man couldn't help bursting into a laugh, and he guessed that the stranger must know a great deal about the regiment if he knew all these personages.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I am sepoy Lal Singh,' Lalu answered. 'I was a war prisoner in Germany.'

'Oh, sepoy Lal Singh!' the man exclaimed. 'Come and sit down. I have heard about you. I am Lance-Naik Incha Ram of this company. I joined the 2/69th Rifles at Ferozepur in 1916. . . . There is no one left in the Company even from the days of Basra, not to speak of your cronies of Phalanders days. . . . Come, have tea-water?'

Lalu felt the stiffness in Lance-Naik Incha Ram's manner relaxing now. But then N.C O.'s were always the same; as soon as a sepoy was put into the mould of authority he became hard with pride as the wooden lathe which was trimmed and made into a stick.

'I shall go and see Babu Khushi Ram,' he said. 'What time does the office open?'

'At ten,' said Lance-Naik Incha Ram. 'But the Babu lives in an officer's quarter there at the head of Number 2 Company. He has been promoted to the Viceroy's Commission and is a Jemadar now. . . . But have some tea. . . . Oh, Ramu, prepare some tea for the guest. . . .'

But Lalu caught a glimpse of Babu Khushi Ram wrapped in a blanket, smoking a hubble-bubble and reading a paper, seated in a deck-chair outside his quarters. Excusing himself hurriedly, he rushed across the barracks square, strewn with wood splinters, to greet the only remnant of old days. He was more intent on pursuing his destiny than on drinking tea.

'Jaydeva, Babuji,' he said, joining his hands and touching Khushi Ram's feet.

For a moment the Babu was taken aback and looked quizzically at the bent figure of the beggar who was doing obei-

sance to him. Then he suddenly burst out, vociferous, hearty, and shrill, as if he had resurrected the complete picture of the sepoy from the depths of his inexhaustible memory.

'Ohe, Lalu, ohe, Lal Singh, ohe, where have you sprung from, ohe, dead one? Are you well and happy?'

'By your blessing, Babuji,' said Lalu with tears in his eyes, and he trembled with warmth at meeting this survivor from the old days.

'Tell me more,' the Babu said in the large manner which seemed to have accrued to him with the paunch of prosperity. 'Come inside and meet your aunt and cousins. Come, the food will just be ready and we shall talk as we eat. I have to go to the office soon. . . . Now fancy . . . dead one! . . . you turning up! Of course I knew you were on your way here. . . .'

'Perhaps you also know where I am to go next, Babuji,' said Lalu in a half-joking, half-serious tone.

'I shall tell you all, but come in,' Khushi Ram said in a loud whisper. And then, putting his arm round Lalu, he resumed in his new expansive manner: 'Come and eat some food; it is the only feast which you will have in honour of your home-coming and my new rank of Jemadar! . . .'

'So you at least have gained immortality!' said Lalu, complimenting the Babu on his promotion.

'Could one gain immortality in the hell of this regiment?' Khushi Ram replied. But he turned quickly towards the kitchen in the verandah beyond the courtyard of the house and called: 'The mother of my son, this is sepoy Lal Singh whom you might remember, a friend of our son, Bhagwan Das, and the Subedar Major's son, Subah. . . . He has come back from the dead. We had given him up for lost, but then we found that he was a prisoner in Germany. . . .'

'Come, son, come and sit down,' the Jemadarni said, modestly drawing the head-cloth on her demure little face. She crouched like a hen in the open-air kitchen, baking chapatis for three of her sons who were lined up on mats before her. . . . 'Have you a mother and does she know you are alive?'

'How could she know?' Babu Khushi Ram interjected before Lalu had answered. And, stretching a mat towards

Lalu and sitting down on it himself, he said: 'Did you have a nice journey, son?'

'I had to spend some time in England, Babuji, and it is very cold there . . . otherwise . . .' Lalu began.

'I suppose they were not too kind to you after you had been listening to Barkat Ullah and the others, you rogue!' said Khushi Ram with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

'But Babuji!' Lalu exclaimed breathless, wondering how Khushi Ram knew all this about the seditionists who were in charge of the Indian prisoners of war in Germany.

'I know everything,' Khushi Ram said with a laugh. And then, as if he felt uncomfortable at having been indiscreet to the sepoy, he laid a hand on the head of the youngest of his three children and said: 'Why ohe, Bilo, have you learnt your tables yet?'

'Once two is two, twice two is four, three times . . .' the child started in a sing-song.

Lalu laughed at the automatic baby voice and said: 'The judge's sons will soon be lawyers!'

'Let us see what is in their kismet!' said Babu Khushi Ram, fawning over his progeny, his eyes averted from Lalu.

There was a moment's pause during which the butter could be heard sizzling in a pan in which the Jemadarni was garnishing lentil curry for the guest. Then the Babu looked up seriously and said:

'Tell me, son, how far did you lend yourself to these people?'

'Jemadar Sahib,' said Lalu, as if he were relapsing into the habit of giving exact reports: 'After my wounds had been dressed in a field hospital on the morning when I was captured, I was transported in a train to a castle in Germany with a Sikh sepoy called Mitha Singh. We were well looked after in this fortress, which was like a palace, with nurses and fruit and sweets and good food. . . . Barkat Ullah, Pillai Sahib and Chattopadhyayaji came to speak to us, but none of us prisoners were interested. When we recovered, those of us who did not sign a pledge which Barkat Ullah gave us were put to making roads, while the others were given easier work. . . . But we were all well treated. And everything that was said to us was

open for us to believe or not to believe. . . . I can't say that we did not listen. Only Mitha Singh, however, agreed to work with them: he is now married to a German Mem and has opened a shop there. . . .'

'What were the Germans dressed like?' asked the youngest of Khushi Ram's eggs.

'How far is Berlin from England?' asked the eldest.

'Did you eat double roti all the time?' followed the third.

'Oh, hurry up and finish your food and go to school or you will be late,' said Khushi Ram, pouncing like a cock on his chicks.

'You must have been there five years, child,' said the Babu's wife sympathetically. 'And your poor mother!'

'Well, he will go back to his village now,' said Khushi Ram evasively. But after a pause, during which he seemed to be screwing up his courage to be frank, he said: 'If I were you, son, I should let them demobilize you. . . . Even I am going on pension soon. It is a dirty world — this regiment! There are so many intrigues about and this bitch of a Sarkar, — don't ask me!'

'I had hoped for a grant of land,' said Lalu tentatively. 'Do you think you could put in a word for me, Babuji. . . . Is there . . . any hope . . . for a reward or something? I don't really want to stay in the new regiment, but I would willingly serve a few more years if there is any hope of getting something which would help my family. I would like to start a farm in Vilayati style if . . .'

Babu Khushi Ram remained silent for a moment. Then he looked at his watch and turned to his sons and said: 'Boys, if you don't hurry you will be late!'

'Acha, what have you brought for us from Vilayat?' lisped the youngest chicken, turning to Lalu cheekily.

'No, child, you mustn't!' said the Jemadarni.

'Come, off you go to school!' shouted Khushi Ram.

When the children had scattered away wildly to collect their satchels, Babu Khushi Ram cleared away their plates and turned to Lalu:

'Come, son, eat some food. . . . And then, if you come to

the office, I shall present you to the Karnel Sahib. . . . It is Peacock Sahib. You know he is, unlike Karnel Green or Owen Sahib, a misbegotten, hard, wooden little man! And there are several new orders about war prisoners from Army Head Quarters. . . . I shall do my best for you, but your company commander is your friend Subedar Subah Singh!' He paused uneasily and then turned to his wife, 'Bhagwan's mother, make Lal Singh some nice tea with his meal. He is a Sahib and may not like lassi any more. . . .' And, presently he turned to Lalu again, 'Tell me more, son, what is life in Vilayat like?'

'Oh, Babuji, why do you ask?' Lalu began after a short silence. 'It was as if people wondered why the guns had suddenly become silent before deciding their fate one way or the other, as if after four years of fighting they had suddenly awakened one morning to find themselves bereft of everything they had, bar the rags to hide their nakedness. . . . There were riots in Germany, for some hadn't a morsel to keep soul and body together.'

'Hai! hai! son, really?' said the Jemadarni, nearly dropping the food she had dished up for him at the shock. 'But I always heard that the Sahibs were a rich race and very happy.'

'There are Sahibs and Sahibs, mother,' Lalu began to explain. 'While the German Sahibs, who were beaten in the war, starved, the Angrez Sahibs danced in the streets and waved flags and sang after their victory, — but really there could be no mirth in their happiness even, for they all knew that some who should have been there were no more. And, after the first few days of joy, there was a heaviness in the atmosphere, the jinns and bhuts went brooding everywhere.'

After this Lalu stopped as suddenly as he had begun, ashamed yet almost surprised at his own eloquence. . . .

'Come, son, eat, I shall present you to the Karnel Sahib and enable you to get a small pension,' said Babu Khushi Ram. 'You ought to be happy to leave this service.'

And they fell to.

'Sepoy Lal Singh!' the call came from somewhere behind the cane curtain of the Head Clerk's Office.

'Sepoy Lal Singh wanted inside!' One of the two Sikh orderlies, who were seated on a bench on the verandah, passed on the call to the group of men waiting to be presented to the Company Commanders, the Adjutant and the Colonel.

'Take him into the Karnel Sahib's Office!' Babu Kushi Ram called again.

'Yes, Huzoor.' And, straightening himself, brushing his tunic under the belt, the orderly turned to the group of men.

But the waiting sepoys looked at each other and whispered in suppressed, fearful tones: 'Sepoy Lal Singh!' 'Oh, go!' 'Who is Sepoy Lal Singh?'

The rumour of his name circulated from the verandah to the company clerk's office where Lalu sat exchanging memories with his old friend, Babu Thanoo Singh. He emerged.

The other sepoys, who had to go through the prolonged ritual of being identified by the N.C.O.'s, and questioned by Indian officers before they were presented to Company Commanders, looked curiously at this soldier, Sepoy Lal Singh by name, who looked either like an engine-driver or a sapper from some Madrasi battalion, slouching along towards the Colonel's office, his bag and baggage on his back.

'Let us see what destiny has in store for me,' Lalu mumbled to fortify his slightly shaking frame against the fear of Colonel Peacock Sahib.

The orderly lifted the curtain and let him in.

Lalu came to attention briskly and saluted the blur of pink that showed above the table through the cool shade of the room. In a moment, however, the familiar features of Peacock Sahib revealed themselves under the thick sun tan, the old pugdog face with deep wrinkles on the large brow, which receded back towards the round bald ball of a head, the sharp, twinkling, grey-green eyes, the expressive nose, and the square jaw which had visibly hardened since the war.

'Sepoy Lal Singh!' the Colonel said in an even tone which showed that he was preoccupied with something else.

'Huzoor!' Lalu answered after a pause and wished his luck had prospered in the survival of his patron, Owen Sahib, from the war.

Then the Colonel lifted his head and regarded him with his inflexible grey-green eyes and said, suddenly, deliberately, in his wonderful Hindustani:

'Sepoy Lal Singh, you became prisoner on 12th January, 1915—had you read the leaflets which were thrown into our trenches by the enemy at Festubert calling on the sepoys to desert and to mutiny?'

'Huzoor—yes.' Lalu stumbled and he knew at once that his fate was sealed, that he had been trapped.

'Did you let yourself become a prisoner or were you caught after a struggle?' The Colonel's tone was almost friendly.

'I was wounded in the rush towards the German trenches, Huzoor.'

'Was the enemy good to you after you had been made a prisoner?' Peacock Sahib was now searching Lalu's face with a knowing look.

'Yes, Huzoor!' Lalu replied, and then bit his lips as if he wanted to pull himself together and explain. But he just looked eagerly at the Sahib's face to see if he could read his fate in it.

'Did you meet the seditionists Barkat Ullah, Pillai, Chattopadhyaya and Mahendra Pratap?' Peacock Sahib paused so that the words seemed final.

Lalu hesitated for a moment, even though he knew that the longer he waited the more surely he would seal his own fate. 'Yes, Huzoor,' he answered, feeling as if he were sinking, sinking beyond redemption. Now he was curiously irritated by the Colonel's mispronounciation of the seditionists' names.

'And they talked to you of revolt in India?'

'Yes, Huzoor.' Lalu was hopeless and desperate, knowing in his own conscience that all the answers he had given were truthful but not all the truth, for it was not so much that he had done all these things as that these things had happened to him.

After this the Colonel paused a little and shuffled the file before him. Then, with his hands pressed against the table, he began to speak, his whole manner becoming kinder, almost seductive, as if he were cajoling Lalu.

'Sepoy Lal Singh, your part in the patrol on the night of the eleventh of January when Lieutenant Hobson was killed

was, in the opinion of your superior officers, gallant. In the action of the 12th morning you lost touch with your battalion . . . . Jemadar Khushi Ram tells me that you had bad luck and that Owen Sahib thought well of you. I have taken note of that. But, as a prisoner of war, you fell into the hands of the enemy and some Indian scoundrels who had escaped the gallows in this country . . . You could not, of course, help listening to their dangerous words; but, all the same, these men with whom you were thrown together were criminals who plotted against the Sarkar. You will have to forget a great deal of what you heard if you remain in this regiment. Discipline demands that you should be demobilized. But on the recommendations of Jemadar Khushi Ram, I have allowed you a certain latitude. I shall demobilize you on pension. I think you are lucky to be going back to your village, and I feel sure that you will make a good farmer. . . .'

'Without a farm!' Lalu wanted to say, 'Without the reward of a square of land that had been promised to each soldier, without the good conduct medal, without. . . .' He wanted to burst out, but the Colonel's apparent kindness, the show of generosity with which he had agreed to give him a pension after his searching inquiries, disarmed him. . . . His whole frame was shaking and sweat poured down his face; his hands were stiff by his side, and he felt a lump rising in his throat.

'Your papers will be ready before twelve o'clock and a free railway pass will be given you if you wait outside,' continued the Colonel. And then he got up, shook hands with Lalu and said aloud: 'Salaam.'

Lalu saluted the elongated red blur before the scalding tears in his eyes and walked out of the Colonel's presence.

'Very insulted and injured,
I emerged from your lane, my beloved! . . .'

He muttered the echo of a hackneyed Hindustani verse to himself as he pursued his destiny along the dusty fringes of the Grand Trunk Road.

His face was taut and set, his head bent forward so as to expose his neck under the German peak cap he wore; his whole

body was covered with sweat, so that his tunic and shorts clung to the resilient sinews of his flesh; and occasionally he opened his mouth to phew a hot breath to relieve himself of the weight of oppression that the shock of his dismissal and the torrid heat of the morning produced in him.

He had walked away from the scene of his humiliation, across the canal bridge, beyond the cantonment before he realized that he hadn't waited for his papers and the railway pass. He knew he couldn't have borne Khushi Ram's or Thanoo Singh's sympathy if he had stopped to see them, and he was sure that the Head Clerk had done his best for him. He had a little money left over from the expenses which he had been paid at Bombay. 'I don't want the dirty money of the Sarkar,' he said to himself as if he were trying to decide a conflict.

It occurred to him that among the many thoughts he had thought ever since he left Vilayat, he had seldom thought that he would be discharged from the army like that. He had wanted to get to India, and the quick succession of events across ports and railway stations and the blind faith in the benevolence of the Sarkar had precluded such whys and wherefores. He had fought for the Sarkar, conscious that as a soldier he had no rights, but still instinctively hoping for a reward. He had believed that just because he had been in the trenches in Flanders for some months and then laboured in road-making gangs in Germany, the Sarkar would be individually sympathetic to him, that it would ask him how he was feeling, give him a chair to sit on, a bottle of wine to drink, some cigarettes to smoke, pin a medal on his chest and announce his rise to the rank of Havildar, considering he was one of the few educated sepoys in the regiment. Peacock Sahib had been kind to him and yet his even tone had been infuriating, the shrewd, inquisitorial accent of his voice had belied the warmth of his handshake. Lalu wished now he had spoken out and told the Sahib a bit of his mind. He wished he could have smashed everything in the office to show his defiance. . . .

To be sure, Uncle Kirpu used mockingly to say that a soldier's honour lay in his right to obey, but he had never grasped the

significance of this remark in all its reality and power. And now that his confidence in the good-will of the Sarkar was broken, he could almost hear the words of Barkat Ullah, the seditionist, which he had heard in one ear and let through the other, ringing in his ears: 'Brothers-in-law, you like your fathers the English. . . . *You like to kiss their testicles. . . . You stupid. . . .*'

'Why, Babuji, do you want a ride?' a tonga wallah called rudely from where he sat, with his legs spread out on the seat, while his lanky brown mare nibbled, snuffled into a pouch hung over from its ears to its mouth.

Lalu looked at him with a mad rage, wiped his face and proceeded without answering.

'Touched by the sun a bit,' the tonga wallah said to a man who sat lazily whisking the flies off his stall of crude sugar candy and roasted gram.

But Lalu walked on without relaxing the grim set expression on his face, as if, through the exhaustion of physical effort, the inexplicable, uncontrollable urges in him seemed to be dissolving and his mind seemed to be emerging from the despondency into which it had sunk to a recognition of Barkat Ullah's words. Now and then, he stopped to look round and see if he were going the right way. And he wrestled with himself, clenching his fists irritatedly, muttering and talking to himself. Then he would start off again.

A policeman on point duty regarded him dubiously.

'Am I right for the railway station?' he asked brazenly to convince the arm of the law that he was not a vagrant.

'Keep straight by Abbot Road, past the N.W.R. offices,' the policeman said.

As if in finding the way so easily along the road, he had solved all questions, he mumbled to himself, stamping the ground for emphasis: 'My path is clear. I will go home.' And, as if this was some kind of revelation, he smiled proudly, though, as he advanced a few steps, he felt foolish to be so absorbed in himself.

II

HE slipped out through the broken railing by the goods-godown, a furlong away from the number two platform of Manabad station, where he had alighted from the slow passenger train in which he had travelled from Lahore without a ticket.

As he skirted round the railway bridge in the twilight and proceeded towards the stand from where carriages used to ply to his village, Nandpur, he felt a quickening in his stomach, a kind of sickly joy as if he had suddenly been released, after prolonged imprisonment, into complete freedom. He had not gone far, however, when the tall hulks of strange new ginning and cotton mills confronted his gaze. The inscription 'Kahan Singh Mohan Singh Cotton Mills,' painted in large black English and Urdu letters on a whitewashed background, reminded him of these two brothers who were said to have made fabulous sums of money in speculation in the Manabad market and who were, even before the war, nascent industrialists and big business men. But there were others: 'Dalal Brothers shoe factory; Mehra flour mills. . . .' Further ahead, tawdry bungalows, of a mixed English and Indian palace style, seemed to have been built up all along the Grand Trunk Road. But the old railway porter's quarters still stood by the dingy booths of the grass-cutters — washermen-cobblers' bazaar. Except that the empty fields on the borders of Kutchery Road were chockful of small straw huts and bastis from which streams of men and women were issuing towards the factories, waking other coolies who lay on the narrow strips of dust on the pathways like dead dogs awaiting the scavengers to come and sweep them away. It was an extraordinary scene — this humanity littered all over the place, some snoring from under coarse ragged blankets, others knotted in foetal sleep, others clearing their throats noisily and puffing at hubble-bubbles, and still others praying devoutly as they washed themselves in the scummy water of the big rain pubbles. . . . And then,

suddenly, the sirens of the factories shrieked; and lo! all this slow-moving populace was suddenly galvanized into furious activity, running like rabbits smoked out of their burrows.

Lalu was depressed at the thought of how Manabad, a glorified village of a provincial town five years ago, had suddenly become an antheap. But even in Bombay, in the railway carriage, at the cantonment, he had felt himself in the presence of a new spirit, of something unusual, the echoes of some great change, some great unrest, whose ominous waves spread out and hovered like a new doom, full of fearful expectations. In former days conversation in the railway carriages, for instance, had always turned on religious pilgrimages, the prospects of rain, and on the fact that God had fixed the prices of grain too high or too low. During this journey the atmosphere had been much more secular: rumours about invasions on the North-Western Frontier, not by unruly tribesmen, but the Amir of Afghanistan, about laws forbidding the meeting of four people together and shootings of crowds who had demanded rights for the people, about draught and the expropriation of land, about Hindus and Mussalmans being brothers, about Gandhi and Russia. . . . And, what was more, newspapers rustled in the hands of Babus, and noisy, angry discussions started about the future constitution. . . .

The sun was rising behind the neglected Moghal gardens, whose tree-tops and ruined airhouses were already touched with gold. A few sparrows twittered about searching for grain by the Octroi post at the head of the railway bazaar. At the sight of the third-class waiting-room Lalu felt relieved that he had escaped from the station without being caught by a ticket collector. He relaxed his limbs and strode along slowly towards Rai Sahib Ganga Ram's dharamsalla, the charity house within whose compounds he had once seen a wrestling match between Kikar Singh and Gama, Rustum-i-hind. The journey had so far overcome him that he felt he might rest a little, wash, eat a few puris and drink some whey at the shop of Doola, confectioner, who used to fry the best fried bread on the cold well facing the footbridge, and then catch a yekka to Nandpur.

But it was difficult to carve a way among the disorderly

groups strewn about. He kept hopping from one side of the road to the other, only to be driven from pillar to post by the beggars who sat at regular intervals, as on the day before the Diwali fair. One of these was covered with torn sackcloth through which the sores on his dried-up black flesh showed a vivid pink except where they were yellow with pus; another was blind and held a wooden cup with a coin at the bottom, while a third was changing the position of his deformed withered leg, blackened by the sun and covered with a thick growth of hair; further sat a naked child, all skin and bone, his nose running as he drawled drowsily, a cry which he seemed to have been taught to cry parrot-wise: 'Take a look, Bawa, see how unhappy, how miserable we are! Akh God grant you never to suffer so!'

Lalu threw a copper at the boy and edged away. Whereupon a score of other beggar boys ran from different directions 'wilking' and importunate, crying, 'Baba, give a pice! Baba, you will be blessed, give a pice!' Impatient at their monotonous, whining voices, Lalu stamped his foot suddenly and ground his teeth, so that they fled, frightened but abusive, in all directions.

But they came back persistent like a plague, some of the boys running ahead of him and performing somersaults with an alacrity which seemed to be increased by the lack of flesh on their elastic bones. One of them, an expert athlete, stood on his head and then walked on the palms of his hands, while the others crowded round Lalu again to earn the prize for their champion's feat.

'Go, brother!' Lalu said impatiently.

'Oh, baba, give us another pice. Just a pice. We will show you another trick.'

Unable to shake them off, Lalu came to a standstill.

At that the father of one of the boys stepped forward and abused the boys:

'Ohe, misbegotten, don't trouble the Sahib! Curse the mothers who bore you! May scurvy get you! May you die!'

'Don't abuse their mothers!' cried a woman. 'Abuse your own mother and the mother of your mother!'

'Ni, go die and don't abuse my husband, kapatiae! . . .' another woman answered.

But while the women wrangled the old man himself came forward, joined hands to Lalu and begged:

'We are peasants, brother. Take pity on us! We lost our homes because of the drought and we came here and found jobs in the woollen mills in Bariwal. But the mill has gone on short work. . . .'

'Down and out swine, get away!' a passenger from the station shouted, lifting his handkerchief to his nose and frowning angrily as he demanded right of way. 'Filthy wretches! They drift to and fro all over the town, idling, begging and thieving! . . . Look out, Sahib, they are thieves by night and beggars by day! . . .'

At the citizen's abuse Lalu turned with sympathy to the old beggar, even though he was nauseated by the sagging muscles, the black hollow chest and the yellow eyes of the man:

'Why don't you go back to your village?' he asked.

'My land doesn't exist, baba! My land was the ruin of me!' the grey beard whined, as he swayed above the heads of the other beggars who came crowding around him now from where they had lain killing lice or sunning and exploring the rubbish heaps for broken bottles, yellowing paper and other odds and ends. 'My brother took it out of envy. He was in league with the landlord's accountant. And when I couldn't pay the mortgage he lent me money on a bill of exchange. Brother, how shall I tell you of his treachery! The heavens are falling. Brother against brother, father against son! I could not honour the bill of exchange on the day it was due and they auctioned the land and my brother bought it. . . . Oh, evil destiny. Bawa! what shall I tell you? . . . I walked, barefooted in the summer, ploughing that land, I wore rags, but I covered my land with good manure. I raised good crops, but I could not get good prices. I lived on barley while I sold the wheat, just to be able to keep my land. Oh, woe is me! I slaved for that land. I sold my daughter to keep it intact. I sold my honour, but I could not save that land! Oh, brother, what shall I tell you of my ruin! . . .'

Lalu was affected by the story of the old man's ruin.

'But surely all of you have not lost your lands?' he said, half sympathetic, half in the tone which one uses to an importunate beggar. 'Why don't you do some honest work?'

'God doesn't allow those sparrows to starve even though they neither plough nor sow,' said a matted-hair Sadhu with a copper-brown face who sat smoking a chilm of hemp.

'Oh, bawa, don't heed him, he is used to this life,' said the old peasant with yellow eyes, warding off the flies that hummed on the edges of his frothing mouth. 'But there is a famine on in the land. God's wrath has fallen on our heads! And the people of the countryside are being forced on the road because they can't buy seed to sow. Some of them get jobs making roads. But now the Sarkar has even stopped the road-making. Oh, the poor man has only one thing left—and that is to die! But he can't even die with honour! For there is no one to perform the last ceremonies on the dead. He is just being forced into the swamps, into the hills and the bazaars. And some live in the shadows of the bridges, some in ditches and on the paths, while we sleep on the boards of the shops. . . . There was a fever which took the lucky ones, but God will not take us sinners. . . .'

Lalu was curious to know more, but the monotonous tone of the man's voice and the flies on the corners of his mouth depressed him, while the stinking breath of the swarm around him was suffocating him. He took an anna from his pocket and gave it to the man and proceeded.

A man sat emptying his bladder by the clay wall of a stable and a leper, who looked like a grisly reptile, sat excreting on the drain nearby, farting with a terribly repellent sound while the beggar boys threw stones at him.

Lalu began to hurry away as if a horror were pursuing him, the bile reaching the roof of his mouth with the reek of the filthy, black drain choked up by the low road bridge and overflowing on the sides of the road. And he did not stop until he had crossed over to the wooden stand outside Doola's shop on the cold well.

The old confectioner was not there. Instead, a little canary

of a boy sat pressing small lemons in a wooden press and serving lime-juice and sherbet to some muslin tunicked merchants from a background of large tiers of varied coloured sweets, cream cakes and fried bread, while ramparts of the more exalted flesh of ascetics lay inside and outside the gates of the charity house.

'A glass of lime-juice,' Lalu said as he came up to the customers who crowded round the shop with outstretched hands.

'Where do these dirty beggars come from?' a young merchant said as he stepped away from Lalu, with the loose folds of his dhoti in his left hand to prevent contamination.

The little, pale confectioner said: 'Rest assured, Lallaji, I sprinkle the essence of roses on my shop every day.'

'Who are they, then?' Lalu asked, seeking to evade the stigma of begging by showing off as a gentleman.

The confectioner regarded him suspiciously for a moment and then replied in an undertone: 'Peasants—they eat the food of illegality!'

'Darkness has come over the world,' said a man with horn-rimmed glasses, who stood by a landau impressively. 'The Banks can't adjust their balances. There is a "money famine" spreading all over the country. Ohe, give me two plain puris with semolina. . . .'

'What is the rate of exchange to-day?' asked the merchant who had edged away from Lalu. And they became engaged in an intricate conversation about the rise and fall of shares.

So they were peasants who had nowhere to go! That was strange! The country through which he had passed yesterday seemed green enough, and, apparently, there had been sufficient rain. How could there be a famine? And yet all these people couldn't be here without some scarcity. What was a 'money famine?' He wanted to ask the Babu, but the man was now serving sherbet to the females in the carriage . . . He wondered whether Dayal Singh and his mother were safe at home and the family land was intact. He had been foolish enough not to wait and receive his papers at the office the previous day and to see what sums had accrued to him. There must have been a failure of the crops to bring the peasants flooding into Manabad . . .

A water-laden drum carriage came sprinkling the road from a spray adjusted behind it. It scattered the sleeping and the waking on the sides, as well as the passengers disgorged by a train, who were threading their way towards the carriage stand, whence came a chorus of voices: 'To Sherkot! To Bariwal! To Nandpur! . . .'

At the mention of Nandpur, Lalu ran without taking his drink, as if in a panic that he might be left behind. There seemed to be nothing but scurvy and typhus and dust and grime and poverty here. And he felt a sudden revulsion against the city. The sooner he could get home, he felt, the better, though, at the same time, there was in him the ache of a strange recurring apprehension at the thought of home. But ahead of him was the carriage stand, distinguished by a number of lorries where there used to be a medley of tongas and yekkas in the old days.

'Nandpur! Bariwal, two passengers!'

'To Sherkot, brothers, Sherkot!'

'Ohe, Bariwal! . . .'

The lorry drivers shouted, each louder than the rest.

And, Oh, what a wonderful gift India had for adapting itself to new mechanisms! If Mr. Ford had arrested twelve horse-power under the bonnet of each truck, the village carpenters had adjusted rough, indigenous box structures as seating accommodation on the chassis, for use on rough roads by rough bottoms, with embellished wooden panellings and flower patterns which stared at you like wide-stretched rustic eyes. Except, of course, that the vehicles had remained what they were, Europe's latest gift to Asia, with their division of the boxes into 1st, 2nd and 3rd class. The drivers well understood their rôle as popularizers of this new mode of travel, for they hooted their horns as they raised their voices louder than the tonga-wallahs and tried to outbid them.

'Where do you want to go, Mian Sahib, where?' asked one of them, who had run right out of the arena reserved for the lorries to the main road to ambush passengers.

'Sherkot!' answered the dignified, heavily beturbaned, frock-coated Mussalman divine.

'First class one rupee! Second class twelve annas! Third class six annas!' quoted the driver. 'Come, how many passengers?'

'Just myself and the owner of my house, and a little child who doesn't count as a passenger, does it?'

'Not to speak of the luggage!' said the driver impudently.

'How much for first class?' the Mian asked.

'Twelve annas for each adult, eight annas for the child.'

'I will give you six annas for each adult — the child rides free even in a railway carriage. Bol?'

'Acha, cut it short, give me eight annas for each adult,' said the driver. 'You are a Mussalman brother, and I want to do my first morning deal, so I will reduce the charge for you.'

'Eight annas then, agreed? Eight annas!' The Mian reiterated the terms of the bargain in case there should be a row about it afterwards.

'Didn't I say get in? Come, lift your legs! But don't tell anyone how little I am charging you! Come, don't keep the revered Begum Sahib waiting there!' And he led them towards his lorry.

'Ohe, a passenger for Nandpur!' Lalu called from where he stood, drinking a glass of the cold syrup of sugar-cane which was being pressed in an old wooden press next to the petrol pump.

'Nahin, brother, I go to Sherkot! . . . There, Mula Singh, a passenger for you perhaps! . . .'

But Mula Singh, with his turban almost falling off the bun of hair on his head, was singing aloud:

'To Bariwal! Bariwal, eh, Lallaji, eh, Babu, to Bariwal! Only one more passenger and we go shooting along! . . . Oh, we go rolling along!' . . . And, breaking off his chant, he shouted to another driver: 'Ohe, Gugh Singh, ohe, a passenger for Nandpur! Get him before he goes into a tonga. Phataphat! Ohe, Gughi!'

Lalu could hardly believe his ears to hear the name Gughi.

In a moment, however, he could hardly believe his eyes. For Gughi, son of Jhandu, the wrestler who used to ply a yekka,

had apparently become a lorry-driver and came running along, ahead of another competitor, hurdling over the iron fences towards him, the would-be passenger for Nandpur. Black as ever. Gughi was yet more like a Sahib with his grimy, white drill suit, his open collar shirt, and his snub nose without any trace of those secretions which used to trickle down almost to his small chin in the old days.

'Come, Sahib, come this side,' Gughi called.

Lalu stood fixed to the ground and stared hard at the driver to make sure.

'Come, Sahib, one rupee first class to Nandpur, one rupee!' Gughi shouted. And, then, he suddenly stopped to stare at Lalu for a moment and shouted: 'Ohe, Lalu! where have you come from? We thought you were . . .'

'Dead, eh? Brother-in-law of a rupee for the first class! Son of a Sahib!' Lalu shouted.

Gughi laughed and ran with open arms to receive his old friend and pressed Lalu hard as he embraced him, muttering affectionately the while:

'Wah, friend of friends! You did not even write us a post-card! Think of it, brother-in-law! Are you well? Rape-sister, you have become fat while we are starving! . . .'

'So you are Sardar Gughi Singh, lorry-driver! What to say, son! How many people have you killed since you began driving?' Lalu mocked at his old crony.

'Come, my lorry load is ready!' Gughi said, dragging him away. 'Come or you will be thrown over the canal bridge if you have to stand on the footboard all the way . . . Come and meet my cleaner, your cousin, Jitu . . . .'

'Ohe, is my family well, then? . . . Ah, Jitu! Cleaner! What to say!' . . . Lalu exclaimed as he embraced Jitu, who had re-cognized him and come forward, rather shy as he was growing to manhood.

And, radiantly happy, arm in arm, looking at each other with flushed, smiling faces, greeting each other with wild bub-bly talk, they proceeded towards the lorry.

'Hippily hop, tipply top, come brothers, passengers come,'

cried Gughi with the impish gaiety of old days. And, exhilarated at meeting his friend so suddenly, he cut a caper, described a semi-circle, and shouted: 'Come on, or I shall be constrained to leave you behind!'

The peasants hurried from where they were making last-minute purchases, falling over each other to enter the third-class compartment at the back, with their staves and their multifarious bundles.

'Come, come, of all the slow-footed oxen you are the slowest! And all bundles go on top of the lorry! Ohe, Jitu, have you secured the baggage up there. My, what a life!' And with the alacrity of the urchin he still was, Gughi sprang to his seat, suddenly blew the horn of his car, till even Lalu sitting by him felt his stomach come to his throat. Then the driver began to swing the lorry ferociously backwards and forwards to extricate it from the congested stand, so that half the passengers were unseated, half knocked off completely, crying out: 'Ohe, son of a swine! Ohe! Ohe! . . .'

'I have a full lorry and money! God is kind!' said Gughi, completely unruffled by the uproar, even as he moved his left hand from the hand brakes to the first gear and back mechanically.

'Why did I entrust my life to you!' shouted Seth Chaman Lal, the moneylender and banker, who had grown a white beard and put on more gold rings in his ears since Lalu had last seen him. 'I am almost crushed!'

'Acha, don't fart with fear or my motor will get frightened!' said Gughi as he got into second gear.

'Slowly, son, slowly,' advised Lalla Balmukand, the lawyer, judiciously.

'I promise you that you will appear in the tehsil court on "tame",' said Gughi, as he took the corner by the petrol pump.

'"Tame"! Son of "tame", sála!' said the old schoolmaster Hukam Chand, flashing his jaundiced eyes at the lawyer next to him.

'So long as I can get to Nandpur in time to avert any trouble in the factory,' said Lalla Bhagwan Das, the brick and cement

manufacturer, phlegmatically, his little face heavy with pouched eyes and deep lines, as if weighed down by the enormous starched muslin turban on his head and the troubles in industry.

Gughi described a bend across the railway bridge with a deliberate recklessness and, pressing the clutch to negotiate into third gear, accelerated so as to drown all protests except the prayers to the gods. Then he turned and shouted:

'Here, next to me, is a life worth ten lives, for it wouldn't do for me to kill Lalu now after he has come through the war, would it?'

'Hein? Lalu, Lal Singh? Son, is it you? Oh, you have changed beyond recognition,' said Seth Chaman Lal, craning his bearded neck forward. 'Churangi *will* be happy to see you! . . .'

'Lal Singh, the son of old Nihalu?' inquired Master Hukam Chand, exploring the returned soldier's face with his bleary, yellow eyes. 'I had always feared that you would marry one of those betichod memnies and settle down in Vilayat! . . .'

'Are you the lad against whom Harbans Singh took out the warrant?' said Balmukand with a sharp legal memory. 'I well remember appearing in the court on behalf of you and your father!'

'The nephew of that notorious Harnam Singh, the trouble maker at the factory!' said Lalla Bhagwan Das indulgently. '*You* are not a hooligan, are you?'

'No, only a vagabond, your humble servant,' Lalu said, joining his hands with a feigned humility. The pictures of his past life crowded into his memory, in an aura of warmth which tended to colour even the most painful of his experiences with the tints of nostalgia: The row with the landlord, the plain speaking with the money-lender, even the murder of Harbans Singh's son by his eldest brother, Sharam Singh when the latter caught his wife Kesari red-handed with the head of the monastery, Nandgir, all seemed legendary.

Some of the peasants at the back laughed, others nudged each other and talked in loud whispers.

'Ohe, look, ohe, look, the brother of Sharam Singh who was hung, and of Dayal Singh, the saint . . .'

'The son of old Nihalu!'

'He looks almost like a Sahib, ohe!'

'Tell us about Vilayat, son,' said Chaman Lal. 'Is there a shortage of things there, too?'

'The newspapers to-day report a bigger famine in Roos than the one here,' said Balmukand.

'It is the prices of materials, Lalla Balmukand,' said Bhagwan Das. 'All things taken together there is a very short margin of profit left in everything since the war ended . . . And the people are again ceasing to build,—though now look at that space in Montgomery Road. It is crying out for bunglas befitting the dignity of the big market town which Manabad has become. When are you thinking of having a bungalow built there, Lalla Balmukand?'

'There is nothing like our native style house for convenience,' said Master Hukam Chand. 'Our women need the privacy of four walls against the open hooliganism and love-making of nowadays.

'Do start building Vakilji,' said Gughi. 'There is plenty of cement lying about in the charred bones of the dead in that new cremation ground, — the brick factory at Nandpur.'

'Oh, illegally begotten, you look to your job!' rebuked Chaman Lal. And then he turned to Lalu. 'Son, how far is it true that they started making sugar out of the bones of dead men and animals in Englant?'

'There is a grain of truth in every rumour, uncle,' Lalu said with a smile. 'They are using the dead . . .'

But the lorry gyrated, the brakes groaned and Gughi pulled up outside the Octroi post.

'We must have a long talk when this noise stops,' said Seth Chaman Lal, irritated by Gughi's alacrity, at the same time as he warmed to Lalu whom he had condemned previously, but who, he now felt, had become different by going to the exalted, prosperous world with which he had trade connections.

'Your licence and papers,' said a police sergeant as he came up to Gughi from where he had sat on a chair with two constables on the boundary of the two districts, Manabad and

Sherkot. The shadow of the uniform silenced the voices in the lorry.

Gughi dug into his pockets with anxious hands but could not find the licence.

The sergeant retreated for a moment and ordered the constable to count up the passengers in the lorry.

'How much weight is there on top?' he asked Gughi.

'Have it weighed if you like,' said Jitu, the cleaner, emerging from his precarious seat on the step at the back.

'Ohe, go and pay the tax to the Munshi,' Gughi said to the boy, desperately. And then he seemed to lose control over himself and continued: 'Don't let them "show their mouth" to you.'

'Control your tongue, ohe, son of a swine!' the sergeant snapped.

'Oh, don't come riding on at me,' retorted Gughi.

'Produce the licence and don't bark, I tell you!' the sergeant burst out.

'You know I pass here every day,' Gughi said, malevolently.

'I don't know anything,' the sergeant replied. 'I only know the rule that every driver must show his licence here.'

'Acha, I haven't got it on me,' confessed Gughi. 'I have forgotten it at home.'

The sergeant waved his head, as if elated at catching his victim, took out his notebook and began to copy the lorry number.

'Do your worst!' said Gughi, exasperated. 'I won't grease your palm.'

'Hold your tongue or I shall have you handcuffed!' the sergeant bluffed.

'Sarkar, let him go, he has got a licence,' Chaman Lal intervened.

'Khan Sahib, I am Lalla Balmukaud, Vakil, and I guarantee that he has got the licence.'

'Oh, leave him,' said Hukam Chand. 'It will be all right. You can ask my son who is sub-inspector in the town hall kotwali.'

'I am not doing anything to him,' said the sergeant.

'Don't take his number,' said Bhagwan Das. 'He has already paid a fine for speeding last week.'

'Orders, sir, my orders are to examine all licences.'

'Oh, get me some change, Jitu, hurry,' Gughi called to his cleaner. But then he ran down to the customs office himself and changed a note.

The sergeant had written down the particulars, but, as Gughi expected, he still hung round.

'Come, shake hands,' Gughi said to the policeman, showing him a glimpse of the concealed rupees in his palm.

The sergeant took Gughi's hand, affecting a lame handshake.

As he cranked, got into top gear, Gughi ground the bad taste in his mouth, looked back and said:

'There goes the morning's wages.'

Then he spat and accelerated.

For a while the lorry jolted along the rutted surface of the Manabad Mall Road. Then it turned sharp left on to the pitted and puddled apology for a pucca road that the Municipal Committee had named Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh Road, for this landlord's help in money and recruits during the war. But Mr. Ford seemed to have adapted the axles of his conveyances to the exigencies of those peculiar bottom-breaking holes which are left about in the roads of India, specially in those roads which lead to villages, as if to prevent the peasants from becoming too soft. And the motor seemed to bump across at a neck-break speed, leaving the few struggling pedestrians, and the horse and bullock carts which carried merchandise, to swallow the dust and the chagrin of being outstripped by the more efficient and modern vehicle.

The sun was already soaring on a background of rusty storm clouds, and the air was tense with the dense odour of smoked verdure and decaying cowdung. Everything was silent in the vast stretches of deserted cornfields where a harvest stood languishing . . .

'You must come to a meal with your brother Churangi!' Seth Chaman Lal said cordially to Lalu.

'And to-morrow you are to be our guest,' said Master Hukam

Chand, 'for my son, Mokham, will be at home to-morrow.'

'Let us have him first,' said Lalla Balmukand. 'Balraj, my son, is always insisting on going to vilayat and I would like to ask you a few things.'

'For two days the water-carrier was king,' Gughi mocked. 'The third day he had to eat at the weaver's house!'

But before Lalu's eyes was the familiar world of the fields he had known, the acacia trees on the roadside, the depressions of water ditches, over each of which he recognised the legendary spots associated with murders arising from quarrels over the diversion of water, the straggling hamlets inhabited by gipsies, sansis, and the cobblers who tanned hides, landmarks of his own sorrows and joys in the wild adventures of his boyhood. But all human joys are poor, poorest those built on the experience of a reckless youth, specially for a boy like Lalu who had grown up in the school of an army in war. And, apart from the element of sheer exhilaration at the return home, there still lay the suspense of that future in his eyes which was the collective shadow of his past . . .

'I will go and pay respects to my mother,' he said to Gughi as he alighted from the lorry by the old caravanserai. 'And then I shall come and eat with the driver.'

'Listen, brother, come this side and listen,' Gughi said, putting his arm round his friend's waist. 'You have travelled far and wide, but have you ever found the things you looked for when you got to the journey's end . . .'

Lalu could feel Gughi's heart beating fast as the driver dragged him away from the lorry, and he knew that the worst had happened.

'Tell me, tell me, though,' he said, turning round and facing Gughi, desperately anxious.

'Your mother died two years ago,' Gughi said.

'And Dayal Singh? And Kesari? And the land? And . . .' Lalu's words pursued each other over the empty pit of despair in his belly, even as the urgent throb at the back of his head made him dizzy.

'Dayal Singh turned mystic Sadhu and went away to Har-

dwar,' Gughi said. 'The land was auctioned at the instance of that Chamuna, and bought by Harbans Singh. The house just raised enough money to pay off the fees of Balmukand, the lawyer, and was ultimately sold to the landlord. Kesari went home to her parents and has, I hear, put on a chaddar with a coppersmith. Your mother lived for a while with Harbans Singh, but she couldn't bear the shame of being bereft of everything and . . . She waited for you, brother, and we used to give her hope, but she never recovered from the shame of Sharam Singh being hung . . . and your father's death and the separation from you . . .'

Gughi's lips trembled as he pronounced these words. And the tremor of his broken accent gripped Lalu's larynx even against his will, and he shook his head at the retreating figures of the gentry who had been so profuse with their invitations to him only a little while ago.

'The vultures!' he burst.

But he could not speak. His nerves were taut, his face was suffused with an uprush of blood. For a moment, he tried to harden himself against his hurt, fighting the uncontrollable impulses that welled up in him, but he turned on his feet, saying, 'I will go and see the old house,' and began to run.

'Ohe, wait, ohe, rest a little and then . . .' Gughi called. And he wanted to follow him.

But Jitu came asking for the keys of the motor and prevented him from intruding on Lalu's grief. . . .

The shock of this news made Lalu into a blind force who wanted to go and destroy his enemies in revenge. Before his eyes was fixed the vision of Harbans Singh with his leprous white skin covered with lacoderma, and the memory of how he, Lalu, had faced the landlord five years ago.

He skirted the banyan tree on the edge of the village through the old weaver's lane so as to avoid meeting people in the main bazaar. His throat was parched and his face covered with perspiration. For a moment he stopped and lifted his head towards the groves, visible beyond the cremation ground by the monastery, but at the thought that both his father and

mother must have been burnt there and their spirits, turned malignant and angry at his neglect, would be flying to possess him, he resumed his steps.

Two weaver women sat combing wool on big combs at their doorsteps and looked at his strange hurrying figure inquisitively. He hung his head down as he recognized one of them who used to earn a copper by making dung cakes for his mother. He felt embarrassed at the fancied accusation in their stare that he had not been a worthy son of his family. And he edged aside.

Farther ahead, the crumbling earth of his old friend Ghulam's house lay mouldering in the putrid scum of the irregular drain. He felt the gulf between himself and his village widening, as if he were looking at it from far-away.

A hundred yards ahead, by the raised platform outside the hall of Risaldar Fateh Singh's house, he saw the priest, who had been responsible for blackening his face and putting him on the donkey after he had had hair cut, grey-bearded now, and pathetic with his bent frame, leaning on a staff. Instinctively Lalu raised his joined hands to him as he met him face to face, but he rushed away before the priest knew who he was.

As usual there were some women at the well by his father's house, drawing water, washing clothes and scrubbing utensils. He did not know how to avoid them. And, now that he was within sight of the house, he did not know what to say to whoever he might meet at the doorstep. He was surprised that he had traversed the distance from the caravanserai to his gulley so quickly, as it had always seemed to him a long way to walk when he was a boy. But he must decide at once, he felt, as he stood there towering over the walls like a cave man awakened from a previous century. One of the women at the well was coming towards him, her head-cloth drawn modestly over her forehead. The only thing for him to do was to walk right into the narrow gulley leading to uncle Harnam Singh's house or to go bravely up to his ancestral mansion.

Affecting to be a stranger who did not want to embarrass the females at the well by hanging around, he walked up to his father's house, rushed into the hall, and waited there. His

heart beat at a furious tempo and waves of emptiness went swirling through his frame, almost like the perspiration which was running down his head. He was afraid to enter the courtyard lest he should shock the landlord's family suddenly and lest they should raise a cry of thief, robber or murderer; and he was afraid of striking the latch against the frame of the door, because, now that he had got there, he did not know how to wreak his vengeance, what to say or to do.

A violent impulse was urging him to demand to see the landlord and then to give him a bit of his mind. But he heard a female chastising a servant, who was lighting a fire in the oven by a new brick house, which had sprung up where there used to be the small cattle shed. There were goats and calves where the oxen knelt by the troughs, and the flashing of many forms. So there was a rich life where there used to be a brave poverty. Everything had changed, and he felt stupid to come here, thoughtless and undignified. They could order the servants to catch him and accuse him of some crime, hand him over to the police. And, this time, there would be no escape from the clutches of the law. He should retreat now while there was time, except that he would have to cross the street again. . . .

He was choking with fury and his eyes filled with tears, distorting his view of himself. He felt like a ridiculous, putrid beggar come to ask for pity with hunger and fatigue in his body.

A dog barked somewhere inside as it had scented the stranger.

Lalu turned from the dramatic enterprise on which his first instinct had launched him and decided to go to uncle Harnam Singh's house instead. Curiously he did not feel any personal resentment against Harbans Singh now, as if he had been suddenly transformed from a suffering, insulted, humiliated creature to a spectator of his own and other people's suffering. He had seen so much revengefulness through the last few years of his life that he felt suspicious about his own impulses and he felt his resentment becoming a merely vague, baffled rage against the auctioneers of his father's house, his heart beating with the ache of its own awareness and then weakening, melting

into a strange tenderness, which culled forgiveness from his frustration.

'Vay, who is this? Vay Bhai, have you lost your way?' aunt Ajit Kaur shrieked, from where she sat flimsily dressed in the outdoor kitchen as Lalu dived straight into the compound of her house.

'It is me,' Lalu said shyly, as he joined his hands and stood, with averted eyes, unable to bring himself to mouth the familiar religious greeting, 'Sat Sri Akal!'

'Hein — Lal Singha! My son, where have you come from? And when?' She shouted rushing up to him even as she arranged her head-cloth round her breasts in the face of her grown-up nephew. 'You might have written a card, son?'

'I thought it would be a strange sight if the camel himself came to the village, auntie,' he said, laughing embarrassedly.

'But, son,' said Ajit Kaur, suddenly and dramatically lowering her voice from shrill gaiety to a sobbing whisper, 'the one whose eyes would have been cooled to see your ruby face is no more . . .' And, putting her arms round his neck, she began to sob and wail: 'Son, who will you call mother now! Son, times have changed! And, may they choke, the crows of the village have become swans overnight. . . .'

'No matter, auntie,' Lalu consoled her, patting her greying head.

Almost as suddenly as she had begun to cry she wiped her eyes and, dropping the sentimental wail, said:

'Come, sit down, son, let me get you some whey, you must be thirsty.'

Lalu sank into a bedstead in the shade of the kitchen wall. For though her ritualistic grief had been turned on and off quickly, his legs seemed to be sinking beneath him, and the lump in his throat seemed to become larger. From where he sat he could see a new roof over the cowshed where he used to sleep, backing on to the terrace of uncle Harnam Singh's barn, and he remembered his mother as she used to ascend there by means of bamboo steps to call him and to give him his meals. He shook his head to cast off the thought, and began

to take the pack off his shoulders. Strangely enough the gap that stretched between him and the dead seemed to have dulled his imagination, and he found himself looking at everything as if nothing here, not even the memories, belonged to him, as if he had, through his exile, condemned himself to be a complete outsider for ever, a stranger, changed beyond recognition, a ghost from another world. . . .

'Your uncle will be coming soon,' aunt Ajit Kaur said, withdrawing, pale and remote, as if she were half afraid of him. 'He does piece work at Brahmin Bhagwan Das' brick factory, though mostly he goes around making speeches . . . And your cousin Jitu . . .'

'I met Jitu, auntie, I came in his lorry,' Lalu said. 'Hasn't he grown since I left?'

'Donkeys grow without being watered, son,' Ajit Kaur answered with a smile. 'There he is—I can hear him. He wanted to be a mechanic ever since you wrote saying machines did the work of men in Vilayat.'

At that Jitu rushed in, shouting: 'Mother, what is this scandal-mongering, you robbed me of the ancestral land and now you object to my coalmining.'

'Vay, don't try to show off,' she said to her son. 'Come, give me your wages.'

'Not likely,' he said as he ran past her into the barn, while she shouted and called him in the name of God and all his saints to pay up for his keep, especially because his father was unemployed.

As the mother and son wrangled, Gughi came in and said: 'Look who I have brought to greet you!'

Lalu got up and, after a moment's hesitation, recognized his friend Santokh Singh, the Risaldar's son.

'If you have already murdered the landlord, then comrade Santokh Singh will defend you, because he is now a full-fledged lawyer. . . .'

Santokh, who seemed to have grown grave with the growth of a full beard on his face, smiled and embraced Lalu warmly, saying: 'I am not sure that we won't all go to the gallows together.'

'But look at his antics,' Gughi said. 'He comes back after a long separation and won't even give us a moment's company, the superior Sahib!'

'Vay, you are going to claim him every day now,' Ajit Kaur said; 'let me cool my eyes a little looking at him for his mother's sake. She nearly went blind staring at the way he would come.' And she turned to Jitu : 'Go and fetch some sweets for your brothers from the bazaar!'

'Don't trouble, auntie,' Lalu protested. He was too raw inside him to eat, particularly after she had reminiscenced about his mother.

'Just a bit of something! Cream cakes?' she insisted warmly.

'Oh, let her send him,' said Gughi. 'Others are good eaters if you have lost your appetite.'

'I will whet your appetite,' said Harnam Singh in a mock threatening manner to Gughi as he burst in. And, then, he advanced towards his nephew with outstretched arms, his tall, gaunt frame grown lean and prematurely grey, but with a glint in his eyes which showed the spark of some unquenchable energy.

Lalu got up and fell into his embrace.

'Well, son, tell us what news you have brought from Vilayat?' he said, taking his seat by Lalu and fanning his own perspiring face with a lapel of his tunic.

'Let him rest, let him do the talk of sympathy and hear the tale of woe of his family first,' said Ajit Kaur. 'Let him drink a little whey before you begin to talk your loud talk. . . .'

'In this land there can be no other talk but loud talk, innocent, because our words are the sons of our deeds,' said Harnam Singh. 'You can't hide an owl in a sack. The shrivelled bodies of men are flying about the countryside like scraps of wood shavings. Famine is abroad and you want to shed tears over the past like a bleating goat. . . .'

'Acha, drink a little lassi and cool yourself,' his wife said soothingly, offering them earthen pots full of whey. And she said to Lalu: 'Son, the end of the world has come. From the way husbands treat their wives, the iron age has come! . . .'

Everyone laughed at this.

'It's the truth,' she said.

'To be sure,' Gughi said, 'I am the son of Jhandu, the greatest wife-beater in our parts,—that was! Except that my mother knew how to swing a broom when she was being dragged by the hair!'

'Go, eater of your masters!' laughed Ajit Kaur. 'You and your kind are the desperadoes who must have waylaid that woman on the way to Bariwal and tore off her silver earrings. Lalu, son, times have changed. Everyday there are thefts of cattle!'

'If the Sarkar helps the rich to buy up peasants' land, what are the poor to do, woman?' shouted Harnam Singh. 'In Bariwal they are said to be eating roots. . . . What would you say to Lalu if he goes and murders Harbans Singh when he hears . . .'

'Don't talk so loudly,' warned Uttam Kaur. 'He has heard everything.'

'He will join our rebel club,' said Gughi. 'As a first measure of revolt we have renamed the bay mare of old Harbans Singh, "Silly." Lalu will come with us and we shall throw a stink bomb in that house there.'

'I am not so sure about that,' Harnam Singh said with a laugh.

'No, nothing can be done, according to Uncle Harnam Singh,' said Santokh ambiguously. 'We must just get hold of our brothers, the thieves, the robbers, and the cattle lifters and send them out to Manabad in bunches to be beaten by the police. The philosophy of Gandhi . . .'

'And you, the son of the Risaldar, talking like that!' rebuked Ajit Kaur. 'And with your education! Shame on you! Drink this and cool your crazed brain!'

A momentary silence fell upon the courtyard where the smoke from people's fires drifted lightly before rolling away to the fields. Then uncle Harnam Singh could be heard sipping the whey loudly.

Lalu was amused by the banter between his hosts, but a little baffled. What exactly were they aiming at? The taste of aunt Ajit Kaur's whey reminded him of his mother's, and the emo-

tions that welled up in him weakened him and dimmed his eyes. But the loud words, that were 'the children of our deeds,' obsessed him. Gughi and Santokh were boys and quite capable of joining a club to poke a little fun at the landlord's mare. But he had never known Harnam Singh so tense. What had happened? In Germany he had seen bread riots, and had gone on short rations for a while. And in Englistan, during his short stay, he had heard that there was a sordid uneasiness beneath the gladness of triumphant victory. But in Vilayat depression did not mean what it meant in India—starvation, robbery, death! From the putrid peasants who had lain about in Manabad, from the swarms of children who whimpered and howled, as they begged or played antics for a pice, from the women who reviled each other, from the look of things on the way, and the talk in the carriages and in the village, he could feel the pressure of an insidious pus in the boil of bursting pain and misery. . . . And, what was extraordinary, things were not being taken for what they were, as the immutable decree of a Fate which no man could alter! Why, here were desperate people, forming clubs and bands of the bereft! The water was flowing uphil instead of down! . . .

'Boys,' said Harnam Singh, as he belched to show his appreciation of the cool drink, smacked his tongue at the bristles of his bushy moustache and beard, 'I must go. The Jatha is leaving with a petition for the Deputy Commissioner in half an hour . . .'

'But be back for the meal as our Lal is to eat with us,' said Ajit Kaur.

'No, you have given him whey, now he is to be our guest,' said Gughi. 'Jitu is going to twist the neck of one of the policeman's chickens for a meal at noon. Why, ohe, Jitu?'

'Vay, what will his mother say to me,' said Ajit Kaur, 'that her son came back from the war and I did not even offer him a meal! . . . No, it cannot be, he is to eat here!'

'Oh, auntie,' said Gughi, joining his hands with mock humility and falling at her feet.

'It is all the same,' said Harnam Singh matter-of-factly.

'He will come to us for another meal. Let him come and see the Jatha.'

Before they got to the banyan tree and at the end of the bazaar, the peasants had already assembled and sat on the roadside, a mass of rugged, heavy-boned rustics in homespuns. The men talked and whispered to each other even as their dark, brown faces, with the big innocent eyes, were turned towards the thin reed of a figure in glasses, and in a queer Vilayati green jacket and corduroy trousers, who was speaking to them. Apparently the sahib was a literate townee whose voice did not carry and the peasants were bored.

'It is Verma Sahib,' said Harnam Singh as he saw enthusiasm at a low ebb. 'Life in Vilayat has done its work on him, refined his voice till it squeaks, and dimmed his sight so that he has to have two glass eyes to improve the vision of his own. But if he has lost his heart he has got a soul, a truly enlightened one at that! . . .' And he rushed and shouted a slogan to wake the crowd up from their listlessness:

'Shout, brothers: "Down with the landlords!"'

There was a stirring among the peasants, a babble at the recognition of Harnam Singh, inquisitive whispers about the strange appearance of Lalu, and a few voices repeated the slogan.

'Not loud enough, brothers,' Harnam Singh said in a conversational aside, as he leapt up to the terrace-like platform under the banyan tree. 'Put more life into it. Say: "Down with the moneylenders!"'

The crowd repeated the words loudly this time.

'Relief for the famine-stricken!' Harnam Singh called.

This slogan was taken up until the shout was echoed back by the walls of the mudhouses.

Then there was a stillness in the tense, hot air and the crowd waited, sweating, packed together and intent.

But Harnam Singh had been disturbed by the arrival of his nephew and hadn't worked out an agenda for the morning's procession.

'Siddha, ohe, Siddha. Where is Siddha, our poet?' he whispered hastily.

'At your service,' answered the poet, and sprang to his feet from a corner of the platform where he had been sitting talking to someone. A medium-sized man, with his long, black, sacred hair let down over his shoulders so that it mingled with his flowing beard, Lalu recognized him as the mystic bard whom he had seen at the court of Mahant Nandgir at the monastery, at hemp-drinking times.

'What is he going to do, the clown?' Lalu asked Gughi.

'He is going to make sense into nonsense and nonsense into sense,' Gughi answered.

'We have a poem after every speech, or whenever it is necessary to rouse the crowd from apathy,' said Santokh Singh.

'Brothers, listen,' began Siddha with a flourish of his hands. 'Harnam Singh, here, wants me to extinguish the fire of your resolve to go to the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow with the butter of my poetry! But you need not be afraid. I am going to throw a little gold dust into your eyes to dazzle you with a vision of liberty.' And he unfolded a large foolscap sheet of paper and began to intone:

'The world is full of liberty, brothers,
It is the fault of peasants and workers
if they don't catch it in their sacks,
bundle it and bring it home.
For liberty is just lying about in the air!

'Nobody prevents a peasant from spending money.
He is at liberty to spend it as he likes.
Nobody, not even the most money-grubbing
moneylender forces the peasant to borrow money.
For to get into debt is the greatest liberty for all.

'If the peasant makes use of all this liberty,
Who is to blame, the peasant
or Chaman Lal as farts?
'All men without exception are equipped at birth with free will.
And they need not pay rent.

But there is one slight hitch:
They will be handcuffed by the Sarkar!

'They need not pay canal dues.
But there is one slight hitch:
They will be clapped into jail.

'They need not pay the interest on debt
But there is one slight hitch,
They will have to forfeit their land.

'But, brothers, the peasants still have the greatest liberty of all left to them,
the freedom which they are now learning to enjoy, the freedom to starve!'

'Bale, oh, bale, Siddha! Oh, bale!' some peasants shouted amid the laughter of others.

'Brothers, give a shout, "Long live Siddha Shah!"' called Harnam Singh, who was leader as well as slogan-shouter.

There was an immediate response.

'Now, brothers,' Harnam Singh began, 'there is a nephew of mine who has just been abroad. He looks somewhat like a sahib, but he is one of us at heart. He has just come back from Vilayat and maybe he will tell us something about life out there. . . . Come, ohe, lion!'

The peasants whispered to each other, 'Ohe, Lalu, the son of Nihalu, ohe!'

This was so sudden a call that Lalu was not prepared for it. Speechless, almost sightless, he stood in a whirl facing the peasants, paralysed as if the ghosts of his past were holding him back. But, flustered, red and sweating, he was pushed up to the raised platform under the banyan tree. He bowed before the applause and then stood with bent head, empty and panic-stricken. He was cornered, he felt, and he must say something if only to stop the palpitation of his heart and the nervous tremors in his belly.

'Brothers,' he began, 'I have been roaming around the world

since I saw you last and I want you to forgive me if I pronounce the words of my own mother tongue, Punjabi, wrongly: You know the story of the crow who tried to walk like a swan and forgot how to fly in his own manner.'

He scanned the audience and saw no response on their faces. He felt that he was being tame or perhaps they did not think it was the time for a joke, even though it was against himself, and sat waiting for the important things he had to tell them.

'All that I can tell you,' he continued as if he were merely talking aloud, 'is my own story and the story of my comrades, and from that you may draw your own conclusions:

'As you know I ran away from this village when the landlord, Harbans Singh, brought Napoo Singh, the policia, to arrest me on a framed-up charge. And I joined the army.

'The war broke out and I was drafted out to France.

'There were twenty thousand soldiers who landed at Marseilles in September 1914. After a few days' rest we were moved to the trenches.

'The Germans seemed to have broken through the English lines and we were put up to fight at a place called Yipree.

'The trenches were like ditches and the rain fell day and night, till the land was like a marsh.

'Four months after our arrival, twelve thousand of our original twenty thousand had been wiped out in the fighting....

'Now what were we fighting for?'

At this point all the resentment and pent-up fury of the last two days seemed to well up in him and sharpened his voice into a shriek.

'To make the world safe for the Sarkar!' he said. 'And so that the rich sahibs may enjoy the pleasures of girls and good food and wine!

'Of course we expected rewards for our services.

'On my arrival at the depot, I was demobilized without even the mention of a reward, just because I was a prisoner of war in Germany. There was no talk of medals or of the promises of land with which they lured us to make shields of our bodies for the defence of their own lands. I tell you that it was a deception of my comrades. It was a lie for which they died!

'I came home to-day and found that my mother is dead, my home broken up and appropriated, and scarcity in the land. . . .

'You are going to present a petition to the head of the district. I hear that the previous Jathas never got through. If you get through, brothers, add my testimony to the tale of your woes. And ask him what the Sarkar is going to do about it . . .'

The halting, faltering Punjabi of his accent, bursting through the froth of churned-up bitterness in his mouth, had risen to a spontaneous expression which went home with its high-pitched sincerity. There were loud yells of approbation, while, everywhere, sympathetic faces turned to each other and nodded with admiration in their eyes. As he climbed down from the platform, Mr. Verma, the little bespectacled Sahib, shook hands with him and began to talk to him in German. Apparently they had met before.

'Brothers,' began Harnam Singh again, 'the sun is rising high and you have got a few hours' dusty match before you. And we want to send you off quickly. We could choose no better watchword to keep up your spirits than that which comrade Lal Singh has given us, "What is the Sarkar going to do about it?" Give a shout then and go on shouting as you go! "What is the Sarkar going to do about it?" '

The crowd echoed the call.

Harnam Singh raised his hand to silence them and continued: 'Now, come on, brothers, form up in twos. And Verma Sahib is going to march with you just to see how you do it.'

The peasants smiled at this because the small, sparrow of a Verma Sahib seemed a comic leader for the stalwarts.

'Some have big feet,' Harnam Singh added, 'but some have big heads!'

There was more laughter.

And then, with an energy born of some grevious wrong they had suffered, they joined up in twos, in a crude and undisciplined, unmilitary manner. But they did not show the slightest sign of that old apathy which had made them sit impassively at their own doorsteps or by a well, hanging their heads dolefully as they blamed fate for the death of their favourite bullocks.

'Now then, brothers, march! And shout, "What is the Sarkar going to do about it!"'

From out of the shade of the banyan tree, the Jatha emerged, raising a little dust and got on to the road, two stalwarts at the head carrying black flags and shouting slogans. Irregular, formless, loose, some with their shoes in their hands, or tied in little knots in their wraps, this improvised squad of men proceeded, a oneness of resolve on their faces, which Lalu had not noticed in the army during hundreds of route marches.

'Bolo Sri Wah Guruji ki jai!' the leader shouted the call of religion. And then, 'Relief to the peasants! Down with the Sarkar! Gandhiji ki jai!'

Religion mixed with politics and the name Gandhi completed the curve in a natural flow, so that a completely new spirit permeated the atmosphere, a spirit of accumulated hatred and little concentration of purpose, though what that purpose was beyond being flogged no one seemed to have questioned through that obedience to the leader which was a remnant of the days of their spineless acceptance. . . . Everything seemed to have changed in the village for better or for worse. And that was almost a miracle.

'Down with the Sarkar!'

'Down with . . .'

The cry caught Lalu's entrails like a charge which frightened him and yet released the tension in his body.

Consistent with his idea of his new status as 'Comrade' Gughi Singh, lorry driver and contractor of Nandpur, the son of old Jhandu, the yekka wallah, had converted the room over the hall of the derelict Mughal caravanserai into his idea of a well-established English apartment. It was a long dark room with two porches for windows, one overlooking the road and the other opening on to the police post, the accountant's office and the stables in the large courtyard, where the straw lay scattered in the mangers, the fowls tumbled down with heads ducked forward even as the horses snorted or kicked at their shackles. But though noisy on both sides, the room itself was like a deep silent vault with its high roof and little alcoves

which seemed almost to have been cut out of rock. The walls had been whitewashed to renew the room, and the old tracings of paint, the embossed reliefs and patterns, had been obliterated in the interest of Englishness.

To this abode Gughi, Santokh and Jitu took Lalu.

The difficult thing was to get all that they had to say to each other said quickly, to cook the food, to bathe and rest, all at the same time, for the rumour of Lalu's arrival had already spread in the village and people would be coming to see him. But an agenda was soon arranged: Gughi was to cook a chicken on the primus stove in the kitchen, while Jitu was to go and fetch some ready-baked bread from home to hasten the meal; Lalu was to steal a cold bath quickly; and Santokh was to act as the door-keeper, to keep everyone away from the apartment.

It was Santokh's neglect, during his absence in a little room on the top of the house, however, that led to the crisis which developed soon after. For, contrary to all expectations, who should turn up but Churanji, the son of the moneylender. He had grown up on the archetypal pattern of his father, except that his face was more padded and weaker about the mouth than Chaman's, his manner more cocksure than that of the tactful moneylender's, perhaps because his chin was weaker and drew heavily on the resources of the double layer of flesh beneath it.

After embracing Lalu with an affection which had not been killed by the rôle which Churanji had played in the ruination of his friend's family, as an active partner in the moneylending firm, he turned abruptly to Gughi and Santokh and said:

'Well, boys, how is the revolution?'

'Son, you wait, don't be too impatient about the future,' said Gughi, who had never been found wanting in banter.

'The henna only takes colour after it has been ground on the stone!' Santokh quoted a verse.

Lalu was still more baffled than he had been in the morning at this talk of revc' ıtion. There were the peasants of the villages around always incomprehensible in their taciturnity and *the cvasiv · of their talk, now going marching; there was* Verma Sal. ›‹ :ho was a friend of Barkat Ullah in Germany, suddenly bu bing up here out of nowhere; there was uncle

Harnam Singh full of a strange fervour and speeches; there was Santokh Singh, the son of the Risaldar, who called himself a socialist though he seemed to be studying the chemistry of explosives; there was Gughi, the clown turned 'comrade', and there was Churanji, who used to steal tamarind from his father's shop and distribute it to his cronies till their eyes were sore, now furtive and uneasy as if he had been put on his best behaviour by toadying Chaman at the garden party in honour of the Deputy Commissioner.

'You are an underhand lot, not telling me anything,' Churanji complained. 'What are you hiding from me?'

'I'll do you in if you call us names,' Gughi said with a mock threat. And he flourished the large knife with which he had been peeling the onions and preparing the hen.

'Our plans are maturing to schedule,' said Santokh more sombrely.

'They are just joking with you,' Lalu said amicably. 'Tell me, Churanji, yar, I hear you have got married?'

'You don't know, brother,' said Churanji, irritable and suspicious. 'They are plotting to throw a bomb on my father's shop.'

'And why not?' said Gughi. 'What is wrong with that?'

'Yes, you say that your father has married you off against your will, doesn't give you any wages, and bullies you, and yet you resent us for wanting to play the sport of spring with him,' said Santokh.

'Ohe, yar, a joke is a joke, but it is a serious matter when . . .' Churanji began appealing to Lalu.

'Of course, it is a serious matter,' said Santokh. 'I will be the first to shoot my own father. The old man got a title for the recruits he gave during the war and ten squares of land for sitting on a committee, while Lalu here was sacked from his regiment for no fault of his. You should join us: your father squeezes the life out of those who stand at his threshold to raise a few bushels of wheat in this blight; while Harbans Singh and the Sarkar between them have bought up the crops, fields and stocks of all those who have fled! W[illegible]an't they help the peasants now? The swine! . . . We sha[illegible]troy them one by one. . . .'

'Oh, don't abuse,' Churanji protested. 'I know things are bad, but I hate all this disrespect to elders and all this wild talk and slogans. The peasants are peaceable enough and they will get relief if you don't go and spoil their case for them. . . . But if they take the law into their hands . . . you'll see! They have got to come to us for loans, haven't they?'

'We'll see!' said Santokh, aroused so that his face glowed almost black with a smouldering, unexpressed anger at the moneylender's son.

Lalu felt that their naïve, jocular talk would soon lead to an explosion.

'But, Churanji,' he said with a persuasive calm, 'it would seem from what you say that the oppression of the weak by the strong is only injustice, while the insulting of the strong by the weak is not only injustice but dishonour!'

'That is it!' shouted Gughi gleefully, triumphantly. 'That is the talk! Now, son, Lalu has come! And he is on our side!'

'But, Lalu, it is not that,' Churanji appealed to his old schoolfellow. 'Isn't it better for the peasants to pay their dues and suffer a little hardship than to become robbers and adventurers and tyrannize the country-side? . . .'

'There are all kinds of robbers about,' said Santokh. 'There are those who rob but call it profit; there are others who rob because they are filled with a passion to provide for their wives and children . . . And as for the adventurers, they mostly desire freedom. . . .'

'I am with you in everything, brother,' said Churanji. 'But no one likes death at the hands of the first miscreant drunk with blood. . . . And we shouldn't meddle in things which are not our concern.'

'Oh, we are grateful for your gracious indulgence and advice, Mr. Caution,' mocked Santokh with a sneer which contorted his face. 'But the peasants are after your blood. Those whose hands are rough with corns pushing the plough, but who have to give up three-fourths of their produce in rent and more in debt, are going to strangle you and sweep aside the cushions which penalize honest work and put a premium on farts!'

'You will spread anarchy as they have done in Roos,' Churanji repeated the stock phrase used by the Deputy Commissioner in his speeches. 'And you will kill all incentive to work, all ambition to excel in the world, all the aspiration for izzat and power.'

'Ambition! Place! Honour! Power! Brother-in-law! What can you know of the taste of power, lentil-eating bania?' Santokh burst out.

'Ohe, leave this talk on the day of Lalu's arrival,' said Gughi. 'I will go and see if that hen is cooked. I wonder whether the eagles have swooped down on the loaves Jitu was bringing, or whether there is no flour in uncle Harnam Singh's house.'

'There is no hurry,' Lalu said to break the tension which now subsisted between the old cronies whom he had left behind.

He was in an invidious position. He was an outsider who had suddenly come back and been faced with the necessity to take sides in the struggle between two factions. His own disillusionment, and the confirmation of what Barkat Ullah, Chattopadhyaya, Mahendra Pratap and others had said, was deciding him on the side of the desire for 'freedom' against the 'hope of profit' and 'the aspiration after izzat and honourable place' and 'creditable power.' And yet he could understand Churanji's position. He was a deplorable example of a youth tied to his mother's apronstrings and licking his father's shoes. 'Mr. Caution,'—what an appropriate nickname that was for Churanji! Always the boy had been intent on looking before he leapt, so that he never leapt at all. Now that he had grown up and married and was comfortable enough, he was quite content to remain where he was. He was not in the least inclined to drop the substance of his father's property for the shadow of these seditionists' dreams, even though the substance was tainted and very gritty. . . . On the other hand, Lalu himself knew that nothing could ever be gained without taking risks. He himself had perhaps hazarded too much, taken too many bold leaps in the dark, but each bold leap had been necessary and inevitable, in the working out of his destiny . . .

He must not be dishonest with himself, however he felt.

For, until yesterday, when he was demobilized, he himself had never heeded the words of the seditionists, and was in danger of remaining a good and faithful sepoy of the Sarkar. But now he was filled with a strange exhilaration, as if he had suddenly found release from prison into the freedom of a new world, as if he had entered a land of limitless adventure. . . . He did not know what lay in store for him, but his mind was made up. And, when he came to think of it, he remembered a great deal of what the rebels had told him and knew a great deal more from his own experiences than Santokh knew from books. And he was ready for anything. There was a danger of complications because his papers and deferred pay hadn't come, but nothing could be done without running risks. The cautious were the children of fear. They could never climb a mountain because they were always trembling at the thought of falling off a cliff. . . .

But he fairly gasped at the rapidity with which he was climbing these dizzy heights himself. For he couldn't even contemplate the situation coolly as the thoughts rushed through him. His head throbbed with the heat and he was on edge, as if he had suddenly become the vehicle for the most powerful impulses, as if the touch of the home air, the touch of the land had electrified the lumbering, weary war-prisoner into a desperate seditionist. . . .

'What are you going to do?' Churanji asked him tentatively.

'In time of trouble a dog will bite anyone who rides a camel,' Lalu said.

'Still, are you going to stay now for some time?' Churanji persisted. 'You may stay.'

'Yes, I must try to do something, try to live, try to get somewhere!' Lalu said. But even as he said so he could not tell what he was going to do, though he already knew that life was watching to see whether he was brave enough for the urgent, restless world he found himself in.

'Will you eat the flesh of mother cow with us or are you going back to lentils?' Gughi challenged Churanji.

'Ohe, he will eat with us,' said Lalu. 'Whatever we cook he will eat — won't you, fatty?'

'You have become a Sahib,' said Churanji, 'and you can eat anything, but if my people come to know . . .' But as he smelt the chicken he dropped the formal hesitation and decided to embark on the hazards of a joint meal with the ruffians.

Overcome by the heat of the early spring and the fatigue of long journeys, Lalu slept through the afternoon, until uncle Harnam Singh came and woke him after sunset.

Gughi and Jitu had gone back on their round to Manabad, Churanji had returned to his father's shop, while Santokh had disappeared on his mysterious business somewhere. So Harnam Singh suggested that they should go out for a walk and then to a meal which aunt Ajit Kaur had cooked for him.

Lalu washed his face, cooled himself with a change from one pair of Germanic shirt and shorts into another, and issued out through the waste land by the outcasts' houses and the dumps of Lalla Bhagwan Das' brick factory towards the monastery.

The peaceful stillness of desolation lay all about the fields, which undulated into crumbling hills and ravines, except where the fallow land by the lawyer's bungalow was thickly sown with clover. There was no movement in the air and everything seemed to be waiting, tense and hot and expectant, as if for the coming of spring.

For a while uncle and nephew walked along sweating and breathless, each to himself, as both felt the nostalgia for the past overcome them on passing through the land they had once tilled together but which was now no longer theirs. Enlarged by the distances he had travelled and detached from his environment, Lalu could not yet believe that his land was not his, while Harnam Singh, who had never dissociated himself from the village, felt not only that the land he had had to mortgage and forfeit belonged to him but also that he belonged to the land.

'I would not mind hiring myself out as a farm labourer,' the latter said, now no longer the firebrand but almost abject, his face drawn as if the earthiness of generations in him was calling him to accept serfdom rather than wage-slavery in the brick factory. And then, suddenly remembering that he was an

agitator who had spoken brave words in the morning, he shook his head to assert that he would not be ashamed of service but proud, for if he worked on the land he would not be working for a master but for his real lord and master, the land.

'In those bottom lands the corn used to be higher than a man's head,' Lalu said reminiscently, evading the issue, because he had not thought whether he would accept the humiliation of being a farm labourer if he could not get his land back or what he would do.

'Forty bushels to the acre,' confirmed Harnam Singh, twitching a little. 'And I was harvesting sixty bushels of corn in my solitary acre before the war. And it looked as if I were going to get more money than ever, because prices were rising. But if wheat was getting dearer the seed was becoming more exorbitant. You can trust the banias to buy at the lowest price and sell at the highest. They can pluck grain seated on a camel, and they can steal a camel by going about stooping — they are that cunning! And in the war, when flour became four seers a rupee in the bazaars of Manabad, they had bought grain at forty seers to a rupee and stored it. A spell of dry weather, and the peasants who had hoped to wait for prices to go up, sold their grain dirt cheap and mortgaged their lands! Who could store cotton and the fire of his hunger together? . . .' And, with a despairing gesture of his left hand, he hung his head down and mumbled a curse to himself. . . .

Beyond the smelly mudholes, thatched with straw, where some cobblers and weavers sat smoking hookahs, while their naked, black children played among the patched, greasy quilts spread out to air baby urine, a gleam of smouldering fire showed up the cremation ground, and the pervasive influence of the burning dead deepened the silence.

Lalu felt an uneasy dread of the cremation ground at the thought that his mother, turned a malignant ghost, might be waiting there. But, immediately, he tried to think of her as the loving mother she had been by whom he had sat in the kitchen, drinking whey and eating maize bread with spinach over which she had poured a ladleful of butter . . .

'Oh, is it our Lal Singh,' came a voice from the weavers' lane they had left behind. 'Ohe, wait, is it Lalu?'

'That is old Fazlu,' Harnam Singh said, turning back.

'I wonder now what rate onions are selling?' Lalu mimicked the vegetable gardener's familiar cry.

'But he has no more onions left, for he has had to sell his patch of land and turn to weaving, which isn't too prosperous a trade nowadays,' Harnam Singh informed him, his neck twitching again.

'Oh, Lalu, son, I heard you had come, and then I saw you pass, and I said to Saleh Khan . . . I said, that is our Lal Singh, surely . . .' Fazlu was panting for breath as he came up, running and talking, his bald head more strongly marked with the pious patch which regular rubbings of the forehead in the mosque had imprinted on it, his eyes dimmed and lashless, his foxy beard singed and discoloured by more copious draughts of the hubble-bubble. And, deliberately lowering his voice, he continued: 'Son, we have been very sad at the passing away of your family — what noble creatures they were! . . .'

'What had to happen has happened,' Lalu repeated the conventional phrase, though he did not feel any direct pang of remorse or sadness at the death and disintegration of his family so much as a kind of gap, a gulf, an emptiness between himself and them.

'They are immortal, though, son, by the grace of Allah,' began Fazlu; 'they are surely in God's good keeping . . .'

'How is my aunt?' Lalu interrupted.

'Oh, son, your aunt is well, but times have changed, oh, son, don't ask! . . . I have offered many a gift to the saints and prayed five times a day in the mosque, but Allah seems displeased with us. Uncle Harnam Singh will tell you, I lost my land first and, now, my web and woof are getting dusty. Oh, son, the times changed soon after you went to war. No one had any cash even to buy a til seed and the Sarkar bought my vegetables at a contract price, and the middle-man ate away the profits. . . . I turned to weaving. But oh, son — times have changed! The Lallas have built gentlemen's houses for themselves near the cotton mills and talk of self-government,

while the looms of us village weavers are being sold as tops for the games of city children. . . . Oh, son, woe is me! But there is only one thing left for the poor man to do, and that is to buy a coffin by pledging his land and then to die! For there is no other choice. Allah knows that if any man tried to seek a little security it was me. I — oh, you can strike your shoe on my head! — I even bought a piece of your land and fell upon your estate like all the other vultures. But, son, in these times he who plants the tree will not water it! . . . I was bought up in turn by Harbans Singh, who has left no small farmer in these parts alive. The breath of famine is in his mouth, the spirit of the storm is in his behind, and his feet create an earthquake wherever they tread. 'Thieves! Carrion! Traitors! Hounds! Miscreants! He and his likes do not fear God! They have built for themselves big estates and the Sarkar has given them squares of land in Lyallpur! Oh, son, times have surely changed! . . . Now, I have made an application for a grant to the Sarkar . . .'

'To perdition with the Sarkar!' said Harnam Singh to cut him short, for he knew Fazlu spent his time toadying or bemoaning his own lot.

'Oh, brother, the Sarkar is not to blame, but our own folk are bent on murdering each other!' said Fazlu. 'Now think of the mother of Ghulam, that weaver boy! She has made the life of everyone black ever since her son became a foreman in the Kahan Singh Mill; she tore the hair of the owner of my house. And children are rising against their parents, brothers are out to strangle brothers, and soon everyone will drown everyone else! . . .'

'You talk of the Sarkar as if they had always remitted your rent,' said Harnam Singh. 'Thieves! They took away crores of rupees as free gifts and loans from the country to support their war and foodstuffs to help to stem the privation of the memnies in Vilayat. Look, ohe, folk, robbery in daylight! They took our grain, our timber, our tea, why, even the skins of our buffaloes and the oil from the poor man's saucer lamp! And there are some people in the villages around here to-day who hide their nakedness in the clothes discarded by those who

have died of plague, while their children go naked! And there are people who have been forced off the fertile lands with the connivance of the Sarkar. They are gasping for a word of hope, pleading for a word of advice from the Deputy Commissioner. But do you think the officials will receive them? They go over in groups from Nandpur and are arrested and beaten before they get past the railway bridge at Manabad! And you talk of the benevolence of the Sarkar! Now, at last, they have found a leader to help them—and that is a faith in themselves! . . .'

Just then a donkey brayed what seemed like a hiccuping love call to a distant fiancée and a pack of dogs ran out of the monastery yelping as at the moon.

'Acha, uncle,' said Lalu with joined hands to Fazlu.

'But, son, when will you come to eat with us?' insisted old Fazlu. And he changed his politics as unashamedly as he had fallen like a vulture on Nihalu's lands: 'You know, Gandhi Mahatma has said that Hindu and Mussalman are one.'

'I shall come one day soon, uncle.' And he turned to go.

Another donkey, perhaps the fiancée, brayed back from the red ochre dumps of the brick factory and Fazlu took up a chunk of earth and threw it towards the beast as he retreated, vociferous and abusive.

But now some more dogs had emerged and, digging their paws on the edge of the hillock on which the monastery stood, they began to bark a chorus of protests against the donkey's love call.

'They are the dogs of that witch woman who now lives in the hall of the monastery,' said Harnam Singh, 'while the young son of the deceased Mahant Nandgir is being educated at the Raja's College in Lahore.'

'I waited so long in exile,' Lalu said with a sigh after they had started off again, 'waited and waited to come and see my village, to come to Hindustan, and now . . .'

'Oh, Hindustan! Hindustan!' said Harnam Singh. 'This country is like a lean bullock that has been reduced to the bone by the Angrezi lion, son. Each day the lion awoke and gnawed a chunk of flesh off the bullock's body and left it weaker

but still standing. And then the other beasts of the jungle came, and set to — the local jackals and the foxes took their toll! ... There have been bad times before in this country, but surely no time so bad as the present. It is one of those ages during which all joy and hope seems to have fled and in their place remains only a pain, a disease which you can't even diagnose by feeling the pulse, a belly-ache for which there does not seem to be a remedy. . . .'

A deathlike silence lay on the earth beyond the monastery and only the sound of the watchman of the landlord's mango groves, who was frightening parrots off the young blossom, seemed to show signs of life.

Lalu glanced from side to side in the fast-gathering darkness and the question came shrieking into his soul: what was in store for him, what was his Destiny? But there was no answer. Only the memories of his life came crowding in to him with a tinge of self-pity. Hereabouts he had wandered after the elders had blackened his face . . . And there, beyond the groves, he had always gone grazing cattle right up to the swamps of the river. Far-off days, never, never to come back, because the past was not only irrecoverable but shameful and humiliating, for the things people had done to him and his own neglects and omissions which made him feel guilty . . . But what else could he have done . . . For instance, once in the service of the Sarkar, how could he have avoided becoming a war prisoner! . . . Barkat Ullah and the Germans had wanted him to listen to them. He did not know these people. He had not known what they wanted. He had not known what the war was about. But that made no difference. He was a prisoner: they had his body, and the soul had not much choice except to stay put and think all the thoughts it could think, to wish and hope on its own. . . . He had wanted to be happy. He had wanted the wound in his leg to heal. He had not minded all the frustrations he had experienced so long as he could get well. . . . It was strange how the desire to live, to breathe, asserted itself over everything else and made one forget the other humiliations. . . . And then he had recovered and wanted to get to India and to be happy in the army. But

the long years of death and destruction had dragged on and numbed all hope and all desire. . . . Still he had not given way to despair. For truly it was extraordinary how one just had to eat a square meal ond one's body became high metalled horse, stamping the ground and chewing the bit in the attempt to fly proudly with high hopes and desires. . . . He had wanted to see his mother before she died. . . . And now all his dream lay broken on this lunar landscape where death and devastation stalked in the shape of a famine which he could not understand, a new Fate to be wrestled with, a new Fate which no one seemed to understand, far less invoke, but which was somehow connected with the war to which he had been and against which everyone was fighting. It was a Fate which was completely unlike the old Fate, Kismet, or God, though it was as cruel a Nemesis as the ancient Fate, and equally unknowable! It was a Fate which seemed to him to have been working before the war, the incomprehensible Destiny which had something to do with the school he went to, with the macadamized roads which had connected the village to the town for movement and transport, with miles of railways, and Ralli Brothers —grain exporters, with fleets of ships carrying cargoes of commodities and men, with telephones without wires, and the war in which he and the other sepoys had fought. It was the pitiless Fate which, like Kali, the old Goddess of Destruction, had shouted for blood and taken the toll of crores of dead in battle and which, it seemed, still spread starvation, death and disease among the survivors of the war. . . . It had eluded his grasp, it had never been comprehensible to him, because it seemed to have been hidden behind the illusions to which he had aspired, behind the mirage of picturesque Vilayati farms and Sahibhood. But now, from the corroded hearts of the people at home and his own bafflement, he had vague glimmerings of this new, inexorable Deity in the Pantheon of Indian Gods. It was disguised in the din and bustle of the cities, in the excitement and passion of his uncle Harnam Singh's words, and in his own despair. He would look for it, he would track it down, the oppressor that drowned the agonies of the people —he would know it and seek to master it! . . . Every-

one of his cronies in the village seemed to be looking for it . . .

A warm breeze drifted across the shadows of the groves and the bells of the monastery began to toll, while some men were seen coming back at intervals from the succulent fodder fields of the landlord after relieving themselves in the open air.

'In the beginning was the Real, in the beginning of the ages was the Real; the Real, O Nanak, is and, the Real will always be!' Harnam Singh chanted almost automatically at the sound of the hour of God. And then ye yawned and said: 'That is Gurdial Singh. His Kismet was almost more betichod than anyone else's . . .'

'Let him not come and trample on my heart with greetings,' Lalu said, skirting the hillock and heading towards the village, somewhat overcome by the automatic piety of his uncle, by the phrase which was so reminiscent of Dayal Singh, with its pessimistic faith in renewal, in the going back to God, who seemed to the devout the beginning as well as the ultimate end of the journey.

After an evening meal at uncle Harnam Singh's house Lalu had just come back to Gughi's room, lit the kerosene oil lamp to illumine the gloom and laid down to fan the sweat off his body, when he heard someone come rustling up the short stairs from the hall and gently stir the latch on the door. Gughi and Jitu were not coming back that night as they generally waited for the morning train in Manabad: Santokh wouldn't stand on ceremony: and Churanji was well guarded by his father. Who could it be? Perhaps someone for Gughi.

He went to the door, light and easy, since he had cast off a great deal of despair through the talk and activity of his first day in Nandpur, and was, at any rate, feeling too exhausted after the strain of a long day to care. But he almost fell back with the shock — for Maya stood before him.

He was breathless and could not control himself from shaking a little. Then he peered at her in the semi-darkness as if to make sure. He had never believed that he would ever see her again after all these years, and the bitterness of his chagrin had

made him hope that he would never see her, even if he had thought tenderly of her at times. But India was not like Vilayat where women went about freely, and there was no likelihood of his ever seeing her. Besides, she had been married off. And, even if she had been widowed, there was no possibility of her ever being allowed to cast eyes on the prodigal son of cousin Nihalu's family. And, now, there she was, waiting, waiting with her head slightly hung down in shame. 'Was he happy that she had come back to him?' the question passed through his mind.

All this happened in a flash. And, before there was time for reflection, he had outstretched his arms to her and was saying in the lieblinging tone to which he had become accustomed in Germany, 'Oh, my darling, now you won't go away from me again, will you? You won't leave me again, will you?' And, with awkward hands, he hugged her tight and kissed her forehead, while she hid her face in a warm confusion, eager and shy and almost relieved that he hadn't turned her away from the door.

'I heard that you had come back and I saw you at your aunt Ajit Kaur's,' she said, looking up at him with a demure smile. Then she lowered her almond-shaped eyes, which glowed like two bright lights, and stood as she had stood in his father's barn when he had first pressed her to himself, except that she had grown up and blossomed into womanhood, and her features were suffused with the knowledge of maturity.

'Come then, come, my darling,' Lalu said, sweeping her off her feet softly but with a flourish that swung her body right round, as if in a dance.

She let herself be gathered up, only drawing the white, undyed head-cloth of widowhood which she wore on the plaits of her straight, black hair, parted in the European style on the side. But, after she had entered the room, she suddenly hesitated and looked up at him questioningly.

'There is no one here,' Lalu assured her, enveloping her with the shadow of his protective arm. 'Only me. . . .'

'I am a widow now. And I dare not be seen—it is madness!'

'Come, childling, come.' He persuaded and dragged her, his arm encircling her waist so that the tips of his fingers pressed her heavy, full-grown breasts.

She moved in confusion, looking furtively this side and that, with the terror of that convention against which the whole of this daring act of a respectable Indian woman to come out and meet her lover, to be in his arms, to be going to sit with him, *barefaced and almost bareheaded, was the greatest crime, tanta*mount to the abandon of a common whore.

Aching with apprehension that the slightest movement or inflection of a syllable at the wrong time might ruin this perfect lovers' meeting, as he had romantically conceived it through Waris Shah's poetry, Lalu mixed up his steps. But he led her softly, almost indifferently, to the bed where he had been lying before she came, silent and easy in the mastery which the knowledge that she had come of her own accord gave him. He had no thought beyond the moment and he took her freely, the large swaying movement of his body demolishing the hindrance of her woman's inflexibility, till both their bodies became embroiled in the pulsing warmth of a world where caution and fear and pride and resentment and hate and love mingled all in a sweat . . .

'So you have come back to me?' he said as he folded her to him with a sudden snatching.

'So you have come back to me?' she repeated the phrase at him teasingly with a smile.

'But I waited for you all that time,' he said shyly.

'But I waited for you *all that time*,' *she mocked back* at him, a glint in her eyes.

For a moment they were both silent and contemplated each other, as if to eat each other up, so that no barriers should remain between them. But then they both laughed at the fact that the words they had to say to each other seemed to correspond so aptly, so ridiculously.

'You are still the mischievous child you were,' Lalu said.

'Except that I am a widow and the landlord's daughter,' she parried.

At the mention of her father, Lalu recoild a little and sat

back, pale and resentful, as if all his blood had been congealed before surging up again in a wild hatred. He had suffered for her sake at the hands of her father. And now it seemed that, knowing him to be in her power, she was going to wipe off her guilt by preening herself on her superior position as the landlord's daughter, without the hint of an apology in her facetious smile.

But, as soon as he had withdrawn himself from the fullness of her body, he felt an irresistible impulse to touch her again, to lift his head up to her and to hold her tight, because he dare not, he must not, love her again. For once he had known despair and had no hopes of ever seeing her again, and darkness had seemed to lie over the whole village, and now she had come to him; once he had fretted and beaten his brow against the walls that had built barriers in his way, now he was free to attain heaven if he wished. . . .

He strained towards her. But it was one of those moments during which a battle of their separate prides was at its highest pitch. So he could only touch her elbow playfully and say, brokenly, weakly:

'Are you still an obedient daughter of the household?'

'I have paid for obedience dearly,' she said with a laugh. 'I killed the husband to whom I was married — at least he died because I couldn't bring myself to bed with him. And I alienated you and died myself, and I have been living like a corpse in an open grave all these days. . . .'

'But now you will come with me?' he said. 'Won't you?'

'Where?' she asked, gasping for breath.

'Anywhere,' he answered.

'But wherever people go, they seldom go together,' she said.

'So you are the wise woman wrinkling your face to look like a judge!' he mocked at her.

'I must go now,' she said suddenly.

They were both tense and looked away from each other. Fear and sorrow seemed to have had its effect on them both, and they were vulnerable to the slightest hurt. For fear and sorrow are unlike love and hate, which spend the whole of person's capacity for emotion on the object that excites them

and are then satisfied or frustrated, but played out, so that the subject is exhausted and immune to similar stimuli. The afraid and the sad are never inoculated against their peculiar impulses, and, like sufferers from evil diseases, they remain still susceptible to the power that has once broken them: their resistance not steeled but weakened.

'But wait, childling, wait and tell me,' he said.

'Someone may come here,' she said. 'And my mother or the servants might raise an alarm. I slipped out on the excuse of going to the fields.'

'No, no one will come here,' he said, gathering her into his arms. He wanted to hold her even against her will and not allow her to get out of his grasp now that she had come to him. Though he might himself drop her whenever he wished to do so just to be even with her. For it was love between them, a war of prides born of their respective self-wills.

He got up and walked about, taut and histrionic, while she sat crumpled up and still. Then he returned to her with a resurgence of his blood and fairly smothered her with kisses, pressing her to himself, whispering and crying out, 'Oh! my love, I had to go so far, oh! so far to find you . . . and I lost everything . . . Tell me you will never leave me, tell me . . .'

The spark of recognition that had lit a fire in their senses years ago now raged with the pent-up fury of their twin bodies, over-running the barriers that stood between them, destroying the taboos in this illicit connection and uprooting all the misgivings, till awareness of the night and of the landlord's watchman emerged with the dawn and extinguished the flame. . . .'

The kerosene oil in the lamp was burnt out and the smoke of the wick hung over the room in a blue cloud as Lalu sat on into the morning after Maya had gone, timing her departure to the hour when women went to and back from the fields to complete their toilet under cover of the dark before men were stirring. He blew out the light and lay down to rest. . . .

He felt tired and grey, but his mind was bristling as he threw back his head and pulled deeply at the butt end of a cigarette,

held between the clenched agitation of his jaws. The long struggle he had waged to control his destiny seemed like a brave poem. He had longed to come back home, not imagining that everything would have changed. But whatever the changes, and however disastrous they were to his own interests, a vague new life seemed to him to be creeping among the doomed. Something was rising, some new force was rushing towards the light and, whether willingly or inadvertently, he was part of it. But it seemed no use to wreak his vengeance against the landlord, Harbans Singh, especially after his daughter had come to him. No, the suffering was too widespread, and it was no use nursing one's own grief among the men who licked their sores and lay all skin and bone, mixing with the dust of the road, the storm cloud of a fate over their heads which was unknown to them except in their wails. He must try to find out what this 'money famine' was about. He must fall in with uncle Harnam Singh. He couldn't spend himself fighting a suit to recover his land. He must do something for others. . . . Except that there was this woman! . . . He couldn't let himself be found talking to her again in this village otherwise there wouldn't even be the need of a frame-up for Harbans Singh to enable him to be a guest of that other father-in-law, Jarj Panjam. . . .

That was the difficulty.

He lit another cigarette from the glow of the stub in his mouth. When he had smoked it with a few short puffs he felt exhausted, and his eyes closed in spite of himself.

A few hours later he was awakened by the noisy grating of the brakes of Gughi's lorry, followed by the noise of people rushing upstairs.

'Well, son, what have you been doing?' Gughi said, scampering up and describing his familiar semicircle around Lalu's bed.

'Who is more industrious than the man without work?' Lalu answered.

'The man in love,' Gughi said ambiguously with a laugh.

'How do you know?' Lalu asked, almost falling into the trap.

'Ha ha, hey, hey,' Gughi hinneyed like his father's mangy old mare and said, 'Lust, fire and itch—these are not concealed.'

Lalu sat back surprised and smiling.

'I know all that you do, bachu,' Gughi continued to bait him. 'And I know all that you have done in foreign parts. Even how many memnies you have had . . .'

'Bright eyes — but your own desires blind your eyes.'

'To be sure, but I have brought back Verma Sahib, who went with the Jatha yesterday. And he knows all about you and has specially come back to see you.'

'I remember seeing him in Germany with Barkat Ullah, but what is he doing here?'

'Ohe, man comes to the aid of man, not a mountain to a mountain! So don't be afraid.'

'You are a high-metalled horse full of enthusiasm, but I don't know him.' Lalu was being cautious, though he suddenly recalled that he did know a little more about the man. He was a boy from Lahore, who had been a student in Germany, and a protégé of Barkat Ullah, a small, reserved, studious little creature who had been one of the brains of the Indian department of German Foreign Office.

'Guten Morgen,' Verma said in a deliberately Punjabized version of the German greeting which seemed so odd in the strange atmosphere of Nandpur. For, in spite of the growing modernity of the countryside, the cow-dung cakes pasted on every spare wall somewhat belied Europeanism.

Lalu got up and shook hands with Verma and sat him down on one of the three wicker chairs, which Gughi had snatched from the auction dump in Sherkot cantonment as a bargain.

'Where is Santokh?' Gughi said.

'He hasn't shown up since yesterday afternoon,' Lalu answered.

'Oh, I know where to find him,' Gughi said, making for the door. 'He has been keeping a vigil even as you. Only he was at work while you were at play. I shall go and fetch him.'

Lalu wondered how Gughi knew all these things. But they got about in the village so easily. And Mishtar Gughi, the roguish lorry-driver, who was everywhere at the same time,

knew everything. But what was this work which occupied Santokh day and night? He had an instinctive feeling that the boys were playing with fire but he did not know exactly what they were up to. . . .

'On your monkey's head will rest all the troubles of this stable,' Lalu said as Gughi hurtled down the stairs.

For a moment there was a silence during which Lal Singh felt ruffled and dishevelled. Also, he was disturbed by the strange experience of meeting Verma Sahib. Among the sudden and sensational happenings of the last few days, this was the most tantalizing, that a man whom he had last seen in Germany, and whom he had never hoped to meet again, should be in Nandpur, first watching Jathas and then eager to talk to him. He vaguely guessed that Barkat Ullah and the other revolutionaries had either returned or sent their nominees to stir up the people at home. And, from the unrest in the country, it certainly seemed that they had a soil ready and prepared to sow the seeds of revolt.

'Have you any friends or relations this way?' Lalu asked, and then cursed himself for so stupid and blundering a remark, because it might be construed by Verma as a sign of inhospitality.

'Yes,' Verma answered with a smile. 'You—'

Lalu cackled nervously and tried to make up for his mistake by saying formally:

'Come on our head, come on our forehead.'

'I might become a hump on your back, comrade, if you use the language of camels,' Verma said hesitantly, nervously, as if he were treading cautiously on a path strewn with thorns.

The word comrade struck strangely on Lalu's ears. He had not thought of people in this way. . . . It was extraordinary how the limits of his narrow world were breaking. The previous day he had been lifted out of himself into a bond of sympathy with those who were marching in a Jatha, and, today, he was learning new modes of address.

'Acha, I won't be a camel, I shall be a comrade.' Lalu apologized.

'Shake hands, then. And we shall sign the bargain and seal it, here and now.'

Lalu extended his hand but looked dubiously at the Professor's face. And then, tense and excited, he said:

'Please talk plain talk. My peasant brain is a little dense.'

'The clear talk is,' said Verma deliberately as if he were listening to his own words and measuring them as a precaution against becoming too effusive, 'that I have come to fetch you, to offer you a job on behalf of the Count.'

'You mean Kunwar Rampal Singh who was in Berlin—is he back in India?' said Lalu excitedly.

'Yes,' continued Professor Verma. 'The Count, as you know, is the brother of a landlord, who is dead. The estate is in the hands of the court of wards, and while the deceased landlord's son is growing up with his mother in Lucknow, Rampal's younger brother, Birpal Singh, is managing the estate. Well, the Count and I returned from abroad a few months ago. (Barkat Ullah is still in Germany with Pillai and Acharya; Chattopadhyaya has gone to Russia and Raja Mahendra Pratap has run away somewhere else. Hardyal is probably in America, anyhow, the group has scattered. . . . Now, when we came back we walked right into a famine even as you have done. Only the famine in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh is worse than in the Punjab. Because, while here some of the peasants own their own land, there most of the ryots are landless labourers. And those who hold bits of land are being fast evicted by the landlords, as they can't pay all the legal and illegal taxes which the Taluqdars levy on them. The war has done this for us at least—it has created the conditions when all over the cities and villages of India people are waking up. . . . Now the Count's plan is to organize the peasantry of the big estates in his province into Kisan Sabhas. You spoke from the heart yesterday and I thought of asking you to help in the United Provinces. Your friends told me that you had just returned from abroad and I felt I would come and ask you. Before I say any more, tell me that you are coming with me. . . . But, of course, there is

no talk of your not coming — what am I talking about? You have given me your hand as a comrade. . . .'

The Professor spoke these words precisely and shyly, except that, towards the end, the core of humanity in his emaciated person seemed to burst and his face was suffused with a warm flush.

Lalu had listened to Professor Verma impatiently and eagerly. He would take the job. For this was a godsend: it was almost miraculous. He could not, if he wanted Maya, stay in the village. And yet he had vowed to work with uncle Harnam Singh. Now he would be going to work which seemed almost like what he would be doing in Nandpur. And, perhaps, he could persuade the girl to fly with him. . . . He tried, however, to restrain his enthusiasm because the mention of the girl might weaken Verma's faith in him.

'I did give you my hand, as a comrade,' he began evasively. 'But . . .'

'I want to know that you will come with me. Say yes?' Professor Verma said, timid yet insistent.

'Of course, I would like to come,' he said with a smile. 'I shall come even though I may die in doing this; I have a dead mother, a broken home, forfeited land, and the sack from the army to avenge. Except that I have got some ransom for my losses, if I can take her away . . .'

'A woman?' Verma was nonplussed for a moment.

'Yes, the daughter of the very landlord who ruined my family.'

Professor Verma deliberated for a moment with a pursed mouth.

'Come, there is no talk, let her come,' he said in an undertone, flushing a little. 'Bring her along. There is plenty of room in the disused palaces of Rajgarh for her.'

This opened the flood gates of excitement in Lalu, so that he could hardly control himself. Professor Verma had not been enthusiastic, but then the ascetic, bespectacled, learned man was perhaps not aware of women and of changing seasons. And, anyhow he had, conceded him the privilege.

And he got up as if stripped for the fray, half afraid of the

hard, cold congealed blood behind Verma's impassive face, and yet afire. For it seemed a wild adventure. But almost every adventure seemed worth while. He must throw away the weight of fear that had kept him in thrall all this time. And he must face up to the danger. From his adventures in the past he had learnt to enjoy danger even if it came with suffering, but now he had a purpose in view. He felt he could go far, far to the ends of the earth, and, in him, his soul was expanding, shouting, bursting . . .

'Now before you go on to tell me any more good news,' he said to Verma, 'tell me what you will drink to moisten your parched throat—lassi or sherbet?'

Man has no power for direct action unless he is helped by the dynamic of a great many favourable circumstances. And an elopement with the daughter of a landlord, specially if she is a young widow, vigilantly guarded in a strict feudal household by a crowd of servants, needs all the help that good fortune can lend.

Lalu, however, had luck. During the day events arranged themselves without many of the caprices with which life had ordinarily hedged the course of his endeavours. It almost seemed to him that he could now hope to master his destiny, since he had at least the rudiments of freedom through which he could choose to do what he liked in this circumscribed universe.

Of course, he had the collaboration of his friends, 'notorious hooligans,' 'rogues' and 'wastrels' in the eyes of the village, but people whose wits were kept sharpened to a keen pitch by the necessity of facing the righteous elders.

Uncle Harnam Singh intensified the political campaign, as he canvassed for another Jatha, both to show Verma Sahib what the peasants were capable of and as a distraction for the thoughts of the big house.

Gughi and Jitu gave old Havildar Napoo Singh, and two other members of the local police, a free ride in the lorry to the town and plied them with enough drink to paralyse them for a week.

Aunt Ajit Kaur at first insisted that Lalu should wait and marry the girl before taking her away. For, she said, she had his mother's dying word to see him wedded. Nevertheless, she handed him three pieces of gold jewellery which Gujri had left him for his would-be bride: a pyramidal gold chok for the top of the head and two small ones for the temples. As Maya parted her hair, English fashion, on the side, and did not do the matted coiffure with which alone the clocktower could be worn, Lalu had a good use for the gold which could be melted in the smith's shop as capital for their new life.

But the difficulty was to find the girl? How to get at her? She had promised to visit Lalu again, had even asked him to take her away with him somewhere. But how could he tell her now that he was ready to elope with her. None of his boon companions could get past the score of servants into the landlord's house to give a message to Maya, except Churanji, the moneylender's son. And Churanji, when approached, would not play. He felt frightened of so bold and reckless an adventure, prophesied disaster and jail if the ruse ever succeeded, though he declared it foolish and impossible.

So Lalu sat about and waited all the afternoon and evening, racked in his mind and somewhat unsteadied by Churanji's advice. The layer upon layer of fear that was in his mind from the frustrations of years pulled in the reins of the wild horse of fancy and he nearly turned away from the path which the occurrences of the last few days pointed to him. How could he stay in Nandpur though? That was the big question.

Then it seemed to him that the worldly wise were never very wise. They were always selling their birthright for a mess of pottage, because the mess of pottage was under their very noses, and they were a little doubtful about what the birthright would be worth after the death dues had been paid! They were persuaded that a bird in hand was worth two in a bush. Churanji was content with a canary in a cage which his father had brought him, while he, Lalu, wanted two gorgeous peacocks, his woman and the Revolution of which Verma had been painting glowing pictures in several learned talks ever since he proposed the job. It was all very foolish and mad,

perhaps. But such madness and folly suited the unbalance in his nature, produced by his experiences and all the emotions he had lived through. Besides, it was the obvious choice between staying in the village of his forefathers as a landless labourer with petitions for grants to the Sarkar for services rendered, or going through the turmoil which was on every side and preparing a new soil. . . .

At length, when the time for departure grew nearer, Churanji was shamed into taking a message to Maya.

But he had hardly gone when he returned with the girl. He had met her on the doorstep. She had come at the hour appointed with her lover the previous night, but come prepared with her few belongings to ask him if he would take her away.

And then there was such jubilation in the caravanserai that it was a wonder the whole village didn't get to know about the escapade.

'So you thought women only choose their men freely in Vilayat?' Maya said.

But Lalu wondered if she would stick to her resolve through the perils of the way, she, the darling daughter of Harbans Singh, brought up indulgently in a household, sheltered from the sun, the rain, and all the rough winds that blew in the world.

'A woman never lies with her body whatever she might say with her mind,' counselled Professor Verma with a cynical philosophic smile.

That decided Lal Singh.

They got into the lorry and were exchanging those long farewell embraces which, in spite of other modernisms, had not yet been replaced by the handshake, when Lalu realized that he had not seen Santokh almost for two whole days. Jitu was sent to look for him.

Churanji, who had a heart, even though it had shifted too near his liver, was sad and counselled a last minute abandonment of this mad elopement.

'But he is the son of a merchant who can only think in terms of profit!' Gughi mocked. 'Leave the rape-sister and

let us go our way. Where is Santokh? We must hurry if you want to catch that night train.'

'You will all come to grief the way you are going on!' Churanji retorted. 'The police will soon be after you, if not for abducting the woman then for making those bombs in that cave.'

'Bombs!'

Lalu exclaimed almost breathless as if the bottom had been knocked out of his universe. So that explained Santokh's appearances and disappearances.

'Which cave?' Gughi shouted indignantly to gauge how much the moneylender's son knew.

'The cave by the monastery with the small temple in it,' Churanji answered. 'Do you think I don't know anything?'

'All right, then keep your mouth shut!' Lalu almost shouted. And then he was angry with himself for bullying his old crony. But he was horrified at the consequences if those bombs were used; it would be murder.

'I have kept my mouth shut for days when the secret police come to my father's shop to press me for information,' Churanji said.

'Acha, acha,' Gughi said to stop the revelations, like a naughty boy half-ashamed at being discovered doing something wrong, when there was a sudden explosion in the direction of the monastery.

'The ghost of the first Mahant Nandgir has burst out from where he was burried,' Santokh shouted the ready-made story as he came up with Jitu.

Apparently he had left his chemical experiment in the middle in the crude laboratory as he came away to see Lalu.

'Oh, step in, step in,' said Gughi. 'It is the son of the moneylender farting! The train is going, going, gone. . . .'

And he started in second gear with a terrific grinding of the gears.

III

After moonshine, they say, the daylight.

After the hectic blaze of the elopement, the escape from

Nandpur, the rush to catch the train, and the brief, sudden farewells to confederates, after the sweat of all this furious activity, came the numbness of inactivity, the irritations of a sleepless night and those trivial pinpricks which puncture the inflated rotundity of big questions and major decisions.

At first it was revealed to Lal Singh that the fast mail trains were not meant for dirty, penniless, cumbersome riff-raff to travel in, but for the Sahibs, the rich merchants and Babus. For there were first-, second- and intermediate-class compartments, but no third-class bogey in the Calcutta Mail. Verma Sahib had not the money to travel first or second. And, anyhow, he preferred to travel third, in order, he said, to express his solidarity with the people. In the circumstances, he had booked intermediate tickets for all three of them.

It was further revealed to him, for the first time in his life, though he had known it before, that if the Sahibs, and the superior, rich people who travelled first and second, regarded the poor as the scum of the earth, as untouchables, the citizens who travelled in the intermediate class had a code of their own, the cardinal point of which was to spread their bedding full length on the sitting as well as the luggage bunks and restrict a compartment meant for thirty-six to twelve.

Still another revelation for Lal Singh was that the authorities, the railway officials, the police and the military, were all there, not for the benefit of the crude rustics, with humps of loads on their backs, but to protect the sacred right of those blissful sleepers by arresting anyone who questioned the privileges of the upper classes.

Of course, Professor Verma had been for accepting all these things, but Lalu insisted on his newly found belief in the people.

As soon as they entered the interclass compartment and found a few worthies sprawled on the bunks, as if they had sold their grain at the highest rate in the market and were content, Lalu began to pull the legs of the passengers and to tug at their toes, urging them to make room. But this was of no avail. For they were sound asleep, or at least pretended to be so, opening their eyes and closing them hurriedly as if to avoid facing the accusing stares of the newcomers.

Whereupon Lalu stood back, deliberated for a moment, and thought of storming the citadel. Having chosen a snoring adversary, who had not only stretched himself on a bunk but enthroned his trunks and various bags on it, Lalu took the law into his own hands and dug into his ribs. This put an end to the snoring. The man rose, uttering abusive threats: 'If anyone touches my things . . . if anyone dares to touch a thing he will be courting arrest for theft!' Lalu forthwith removed the luggage from the bunk and made room for the tired Maya to sit on.

Remained the problem of himself and Verma Sahib getting a little space for themselves. The battle of wills and words, which had had to be fought in order to secure a seat for the girl, had somewhat exhausted the drooping little Professor. He had counselled peace and recommended standing and waiting till some passenger got out. But by now even he had been aroused to mild impatience and hastened to bring the station-master at the next big station.

Two hours' standing and sitting on the hard floor had not improved Lalu's temper and there was a frantic row when the stationmaster arrived. The sleeping worthies rose as one man and, with a muscular hardening that contorted their faces into caricatures of themselves, alleged that they had heard this trouble-maker and his companions talk about the woman whom they had abducted and put to sleep there; that these ruffians had offered insulting behaviour to respectable people in the compartment; that they were surely robbers, thieves or dangerous characters, otherwise they would never make a young woman travel in a men's compartment but would put her in a female purdah compartment. At this Professor Verma flared up in wild, short spurts of anger and the allegations of the citizens were in danger of being proved. But, luckily, the train was about to start and the stationmaster secured them a precarious rumphold on the edge of a bunk and pacified them all.

So they leaned over each other and slept a fitful sleep, none the less sweet for its awkwardness. And, before they had been completely submerged in the depths of their nightmares, the train steamed into Delhi Station. A few of the citizens alighted

here, and, though more inundated the carriage, Lalu had secured half a bunk and reserved it for the party by employing the tactics of the intermediate class.

Used to the comfort of soft beds and plenty of sleep, Maya and Verma accepted small shares in the available space, while Lalu preferred to be a martyr. It was his first journey through the Gangetic plain whose every patch was an historical monument, and he spent the day swallowing the dust which the fast train blew up in its downrush, and in devouring the changing scene with a red-eyed curiosity.

Beyond Delhi, once Hastinapura, seat of epic Hindu kings, then capital of a long series of Muhammadan princes, now capital of the British Raj, through a hundred ancient cities and villages, with ruined walls, broken towers and graveyards, under the shadow of wind-blown, faded structures there emerged new brick-and-mud huts, teeming with a small dark, betel-leaf-eating-spitting southern humanity. Professor Verma had said that the ryots here were suffering from a worse famine than the Punjab peasants. And, truly, from the dry, skin and bone, dark, slightly built passengers in tattered clothes, waiting abjectly in the penfolds of third-class waiting-rooms, there seemed to be no sign that the festival of spring would ever be celebrated in these parts. . . .

He wondered what kind of work he would be called upon to do in this land.

There was no mistaking the fire of wrath that was sweeping over the country — it had certainly fanned the fumes in his heart till he felt red hot. Why, indeed, what were the Sahibs doing in this country? Or, as Verma put it, what business had the Sarkar to exact 'blood money' from the people and leave them to swallow rice gruel on the dusty roadside when every official ate a five-course tiffin? The Sahibs were no gods, as he himself had seen at close quarters in Europe. The days were gone when he could be cowed by the red-faced monkeys or by rich Indians, like Harbans Singh and the other greasy sycophants. Why, the Hindustanis were a separate nation like the Germans and the Francisis and the Angrezi people! And they deserved respect as men. Why should they always be abused

by the Goras as blackmen who were used to relieving themselves on the ground! They had the right to be a separate nation and, what was more, they had the right to own their land! . . .

Actually he realized, as he looked out of the window on the dusty landscape, it was Professor Verma who had put this idea into his head. But, with growing belief in his own judgment, he was inclined to think that his friend had only confirmed what had been in his mind for a long time. Anyhow, he said to himself, no man has ever originated an idea. For a thought was what a great many men were feeling from their own experience. Then someone chose a word which expressed this idea, and the word went round and everyone agreed it was a new idea though they had had the idea long before. . . .

To be sure, he had defied the landlord of his village, and had had the courage to stand up for himself whenever he had been insulted. Though he realized, that it was a question of more than personal affronts. It was the things people in authority did, the wrongs they heaped upon the people, that had hurt his conscience. And it was so everywhere, in France, in Flanders, in Germany, in Englistan and in Hindustan — in China, too, and Japan, if Uncle Kirpu's jokes were to be trusted to tell the truth. Everywhere it was the same. In fact, it seemed to him, there were no black or white people, no yellow or brown people, not even Francisis and Germans, and English and Hindustanis, and Chinis and Japanis, but there were only two races and two religions in the world, the rich and the poor. . . .

The smoke of the engine fell in huge particles and he withdrew his face from the open and sat bent-headed in a corner. Wisps of memories of Vilayat came to him. Why, in the little twinkling that had lasted four years, he had seen men bayonetted, houses destroyed by bombs, women shrieking in the streets, children licking the glass outside sweet-shops. And though the rumblings of the thunder of war could be heard no more, its electricity seemed to have struck the world and left it burning. And a heavy cloud seemed still to hover over the lives of people in every land, broken lives, maimed by the war. . . . For a moment he could see the long vista of the

ghosts of the dead strung on barbed wire across no-man's land, And the heaps of bodies which spread on the land where green fields had been . . . He had hesitated to believe Verma when the Professor said that all this madness had been brought about in the world by the lust of a few for Empire, and yet, from the changes on the map of the world, it appeared to be so. . . .

The words of a Jat Sapper prisoner in the camp in Germany, which had always seemed to him to touch the truth, came to his mind: 'Greed, brother, greed is the cause of hatred and war. Man is dazzled and blinded by wealth. And it is the curse of Rajahs and Maharajas that they love glory and power and wealth, loading their necks, their heads, their feet, their ears and even their noses with jewels and diamonds. And if they hear another man has more money, or is getting more powerful, then they send out their soldiers to fight the soldiers of other kings . . .' And he recalled the story of Raja Bhogi Singh which the Jat had told him. The Raja's grandfather had been given sixty thousand acres of land by the Sarkar. The Jat had belonged to the company of Sappers and Miners which Raja Bhogi Singh had given to the Sarkar as his contribution to the war, in the expectation of a new title, 'And Bhogi Singh was building a new palace when I came,' the sapper had said, 'with giant doors on each side. The harvest had been good and I saw stacks of the newly reaped corn standing in every house. But what will folks do when the Patwari comes and takes one-third of the produce away this year instead of the fourth that should be the estate's due? But it is that palace and this war! I know that some families will go without salt in my part now. . . .' An N.C.O. had turned to the sapper and said, 'there is plenty of salt in your tongue,' and had shut him up. . . . Perhaps the estates among which he was going to work were like the one from which the sapper came, for the man had hailed from Oudh. . . .

But how would his life with this girl work out?

He looked at Maya. She was dozing, and little pearly beads of perspiration covered her olive-coloured face, framed by the cloth on her head, making her seem like a curiously innocent,

delicate flower, a pale rose. 'Why have I plucked you from the garden of your father's home?' he seemed to be asking her as he contemplated her. She seemed as if she might crumple up with exposure to the hot suns of the southern land through which they were passing. He would have to hold her gently, for rose petals fell away at the touch of any adverse wind. He looked at her again and caressed each feature of her face: she had beautiful almond eyes, the transparent colouring of her cheeks was washed clear like ivory, her fine nose palpitated like a sensitive plant, her full lips which were pursed in a pout. She was asleep and far away, her face unruffled by any lines of suffering, as if even her widowhood had left her unaware. He laid his hands on her gently and said to himself: 'Why, oh why, did I encumber myself with a breakable possession like you when I had just succeeded in controlling my own destiny for once?' She had no idea of the dangerous life to which he was taking her. It was almost as if they had walked out blindfold with only the smell of each other to guide them. Not as blindfold, perhaps, as the oxen who were just sold or given in marriages arranged by their parents, because both he and Maya had chosen each other from the instinctive knowledge of a connection in their bodies, but still blindfold about the awkwardness which were in their different bodies, their different minds, sprung and nurtured, his in travail and hers in the perfume of a luxury he hated. . . .

All day this and other questions revolved themselves in his mind dissolving like bubbles of froth into smaller agitations, which his tired, sleepless brain tended to split into still smaller impatiences, till the difficulties of love and work tore his soul into a thousand shreds. . . .

But as the train steamed into Allahabad some Congress friends of Professor Verma came with a bunch of railway coolies and gave the Sahib such a resounding ovation that politics seemed to make life an hilarious, enthusiastic ecstasy of contacts and sweating together, which sent an invisible energy stealing across the spine, a thrill half full of fear, half instinct with the forward pressure in the expanding corpuscles of one's blood. . . .

And, as they changed here into a branch-line train, and he rested his head in Maya's lap to quench his sleep for a while, he seemed to submit to the warmth of her thighs, to the passionate, sensual forgetfulness in her which turned the gnawing doubts in his mind into the stillness that follows a delirium. . . .

The Count was waiting for them at Rajgarh station in answer to the wire which Verma had sent him from Allahabad. Lalu recognized him as he had come to the prison camp in Germany, the self-same easy-going, loosely-dressed, quick-witted buffoon who once seen could never be forgotten, his straight hair weighting his forehead and giving him the air of being ducked in thought, a lurking smile on the corners of his full lips and on the high cheek-bones, which seemed to contract his eyes behind the thick glasses.

'Say, friend, how goes it?' he greeted Verma, and the smile on the corners of his lips became mischievous. And then he turned to Lalu and said: 'So, after all, we have got you in spite of your talk of your oath to the Sarkar.' And the mischievous smile on his face became a broad grin.

'Eggs and oaths are soon broken, Kanwar Sahib,' Lalu said in a rare, un-Punjabized Hindustani accent.

'Brother, no one loves his chains though they be of gold,' said the Count.

'Don't let us stand grinning here,' said Professor Verma, and they all laughed, as he was generally known to do quite the contrary. 'Specially as the comrade's wife must be tired and hungry,' he added.

'I hope you are not angry that I have brought my wife with me,' Lalu apologized.

'Your mistress,' corrected Maya brightly, 'and not brought but abducted.'

'Come, come, my whole house is yours,' said the Count, 'provided you don't lay hands on it.' And he called: 'Ram Din.'

A tall, lanky man in a homespun tunic and dhoti, with clean-cut features, came forward from where he was collecting the luggage, joined hands, and said: 'Yes, Maharaj.'

'We shall go on the elephant, since this is to be a bridal procession,' the Count said with a laugh, 'while you, Secretary Sahib, go with the luggage on the Yekka.'

'We have still to yield the tickets,' Professor Verma said as they began to cross from the platform towards a patch of forest beyond the siding.

'It is our own house,' the Count said, assuming the manner of the feudal lord whose ancestors had had this station built on the edge of their estate.

Lalu had thought that the Count was fooling when he had said he preferred an elephant for the ride home, but lo!—there, indeed, was the elephant standing beyond the goods trucks. He had never ridden an elephant before in his life, and it seemed so ridiculous that these revolutionaries, who were all for machine and motor power, should be riding home on this most ancient of Indian mounts.

'Your own calf's teeth seem golden,' the Count said, guiding them towards the dusty path which led through the fields to the village of Rajgarh. 'But we take a justifiable pride in our royal vehicle whose tusks are mounted with gold.'

'What would comrade Lenin say if he knew that we were riding in feudal splendour?' Verma said half solemnly.

'He would find virtue in a camel if there was not an electric train to hand, Verma Sahib! Come, come and get on it.'

But they all stood laughing as the elephant sat down ponderously, haunches first, at the Mahout's orders.

'Come on, Verma Sahib,' the Count called again roguishly.

Professor Verma hesitated, then went forward, half anxious, half ashamed. As there was no ladder he began to scramble up to the elephant's back like a mouse on a mountain, but with a weaker grasp, for he rolled back, so that even the elephant seemed to laugh rudely.

'Ladies first,' Professor Verma suggested to save face.

Maya was timid and shrieked with happiness and fear. But, then, with a sudden jerk, she began to scramble up and, with the help of the driver, got on to the quilted top.

'Now, there, a woman has shamed you both!' the Count said.

Lalu took up the challenge and struggled to mount, only to go down on the other side.

'Climb up yourself and then we shall see!' Professor Verma challenged the Count.

'I know the magic,' replied the Count. And, reciting the Muhammadan prayer 'Bismillah al Rahman ul Rahim' mockingly, he turned to the mound of dark flesh before him. Then, affecting the air of the expert, he addressed the animal, 'tell me, *elephant, which of your bones is straight?*' and applied his ears to the mount's snozzle. As if he had obtained the secret, and, with great assurance, he climbed up on top by way of the tail. From his secure position he pulled up first Lalu and then Verma, and gave them instructions to hang on to the ropes over the quilt on which they sat. The Mahout jumped up with ease and alacrity over the trunk. The mountain underneath wobbled, shook, rose, straightened and started off amid shouts of triumph from the riders as well as the few spectators.

'There are some advantages in being a prince,' Verma said as they all adjusted themselves and the elephant began to walk through the fast-gathering darkness across a dusty track through flat fields.

'Now I shall tell you some of the disadvantages,' the Count said. And, after a pause to cough out the congestion in his chest, he puckered into a soft wispish smile and continued: 'Scarcity of men made my father a judge, and a judge's son remains a judge even though he may become a comrade. . . . Always in my boyhood people said I was daft. So I became an atheist and poked fun at religion, which is as widespread as small-pox in the lands watered by the Ganges. Then, as I grew up and acquired a few friends, they said I was a hooligan, so I began to gamble, if only to live up to the reputation they had given me. At that they declared that I was mad, so I became a drunkard, thinking that they would be frightened of me and regard me as an ordinary human being. But all that I did only confirmed their belief in my derangement, so I cut my losses and became an out-and-out revolutionary. Now

I am forgiven all my crimes, from bad company to murder and rape, for they expect anything and everything from a revolutionary. Meanwhile, I enjoy the glory of Leaderi and my imagination is kept ablaze day and night by the reverence that you of the rank and file offer me. . . . But away with these bourgeois considerations! The thing I want to tell you is that both the Government and the landlords are on the war-path. They are beating up the tenants if they catch them on their way to come and tell me their grievances. And they are beginning to evict them in larger numbers. Not that those who come into the world and only acquire a rag for their fores, which hardly covers their afts, are to be prevented from Revolution! For, if at one time there were only one or two thieves robbing them, now there are hundreds. At first the Sarkar. Everyone knows that. Then the absentee landlords—also taken for granted. . . . But there have grown up mushrooms of non-cultivating, rent-receiving intermediaries and parasites, so that the position of the smallholder is hopeless, and the conflict between the landlords and expropriated peasants is inevitable. You have only to collect the evicted tenants who come to my door and you can go and make a Revolution. . . .'

'According to Marx,' said Professor Verma, laying down the law like a Pundit, 'there cannot be a Revolution without class-consciousness. And, according to Comrade Lenin, the fight for the freedom of India is the first objective, and the intensification of propaganda among the masses a subsidiary task. . . .'

'You are a bourgeois intellectual!' mocked the Count.

'Well, if it is the Revolution we are after,' said Lal Singh with a belief in action far in excess of the Marxism he had so far imbibed, 'let us go and make this bitichod Revolution!'

'Hai! hai! and kill all the landlords!' exclaimed Maya naïvely. 'God spoil your plans!'

'Don't be frightened, the landlords are too clever for them,' Professor Verma assured her with mock irony.

'Yes, we bourgeois shall show these ruffians what it is to disturb the peace, the beauty and the joy of this land of ours!' the Count said ironically, pointing to the gossamer web of sombre grey which covered the fields beyond the scrubwood,

under the vivid orange and yellow and red-streaked sky above the silver line of the Ganges.

'Comrade Rampal Singh, you are a Kulak . . .' Professor Verma began. 'And . . .'

But the muscles of the rubber mountain on which they were riding had already been straining Verma's small rump and, as he turned to proclaim his dictum, he rolled off and fell with a thud on the dust.

The elephant stopped, as if by instinct and, luckily, Verma was unhurt except for the shock to his dignity.

The driver picked him up and put him back on his seat, even as they all split their sides with nervous laughter.

'Acha, friend, you were going to call me a counter-revolutionary,' the Count taunted Verma when they had all adjusted themselves and the elephant began to move again. 'Now you will be pleased to know that I am not on the best terms with my family. My deceased brother, the Raja Sahib of Rajgarh, left a minor son, and the boy's mother, who lives in Lucknow, has let it be known that she has no affection for me. My mother, the Queen-Mother, who lives in a wing of the old palace at Rajgarh, has always regretted that she ever reared me up to be the idol-breaking lout that I am. My younger brother, who is managing the estate, has been warned by the Government about me and remains too silent and disapproving for my liking. But, in spite of this, I suppose, I still remain a bourgeois! Scarcity of . . .'

'Our job is to knit the small landholders, the tenants, the evicted tenants and labourers together and to formulate their immediate and local demands,' said Verma to cut short the foolery.

'If you are too addicted to theory, action is poisoned at the source,' said the Count.

'The cuckoo sings while the nightingale plays,' said Lalu, 'while the other birds work for a living.'

The dusk was deepening the foliage of the groves, limned against the dark blue sky, as they left the forest track and got on to a metalled road. The dust of the day had settled, and the shadows of each bush and tree shone clear in the light of a pale

quarter moon and the early stars, Venus and Mars, while the fields undulated in a limitless flat overgrown with bush and stubble, except where they were interspersed with shallow meadows covered with high corn or lentils or groves round a wall by some God-forsaken hamlet. The eerie swish of the Ganges now defined the northern limits of Rajgarh.

As the elephant crossed through a splendid ruined gateway, which stood like a bridge over a moat, the Count explained that Rajgarh was once a fortress built by his great grandfather on the bend of the Ganges, where he had fought the Moguls.

'It was blasted to pieces three times during those wars,' the Count said. 'And yet three times the village arose again from its ruins.'

'Not quite arose,' mocked Verma as they passed by the low, scarred mounds and ridges overgrown with wild bushes and drifts of cactus from which jutted the broken masonry and carved stones of the ruins.

'Don't you cast aspersions on the court of'wards!' warned the Count with a raised finger. 'Otherwise, they will withdraw the privilege of appropriating any more space from that dhak forest for that guava garden which my brother Birpal has planted opposite the dak bungalow!'

'I am blaming your ancestors,' Verma said.

'How so?' the Count almost leapt to the charge.

'Because the great, heroic, battles of princes in history have not altogether had happy endings for the people,' said Professor Verma dryly.

'Ah, but you must remember,' said the Count, half sarcastic, half proud, 'that before my great grandfather, the robber, came, the dhak jungle spread over the whole of this area. My ancestors and their followers cleared the land, built a house on what used to be a cremation ground, repopulated the village with the two highest castes, us Rajputs and a few Brahmins, and, of course, such menial castes as sweepers, cobblers, weavers, potters and others who are necessary for serving the exalted.... Furthermore, there used to be a popular tradition that the village lies at the centre of the sacred region, where a hundred

thousand sages assembled to attend the sacrificial ceremony of an ancestor of Sri Ram Chandar. So my revered great grandfather, the robber, built a new temple on the ruins of the old tapobhumi, rededicated the ground occupied by the rishis, and thus washed away all his sins. Now, thousands of pilgrims come here to wash off their sins: What more do you expect from valiant Rajput princes, the tips of whose beards looked two different ways? And, as for us moderns, my father had the new palace built, because the old house was said to be haunted; and the late Raja Sahib had that dak bungalow built as a bribe for the Deputy Commissioner and such other Sahibs as may deign to come and play shikar? . . . And my brother, Kanwar Birpal Singh, has had that summer house built on top of the ridge as a retreat and for his own guests. You must admit that we bourgeois are great builders!'

'And the less you say about the real village the better!' said Verma.

Indeed, one couldn't say anything about the village of Rajgarh for there was no village to speak of, only a site for a village, with a few fantastic, gnarled clusters of tumble down, thatched and tiled mud huts and russet cottages which stood beyond the primitive, whitewashed cottage hospital, across a stretch of waste land broken by deep manure pits.

At the sound of the elephant's bells men bowed down by catastrophes, women bent low by toil, who crouched by twig fires, and children who played on the dust, rose and joined hands to the passing prince. A camel who stood tied in the street grunted a cheerless greeting to the elephant. Some lean goats added their tribute. A mangy stray bitch, suckling a brood of puppies, disapproved of the strangers on the elephant's back. A host of respectable officials and high caste men crowded to the doorsteps of more regularly built homesteads and made obeisance to the exalted. The shopkeepers in the seven or eight shops, which stood in two rows, got up from their ledgers, illuminated by little earthen saucer-lamps, and bowed abjectly. A group of palace servants, who sat gossiping in the market-place, ran helter-skelter, while a host of retainers came out from the oppression of jallied windows, onion-

domed towers, great doors and pigeon lofts, towards the deep shadow of a neem tree in the courtyard to receive the guests.

Lalu and Maya were given a room furnished in English-Indian style in the old house, overlooking the river, a stone's throw away from the mausoleum-like structure of the new palace.

Serenity returned with the deep night, only disturbed by the Count's loud-mouthed calls to his personal servant, Ganga, to hasten the meal.

Some sweetly scented creepers in the orchard around the new palace spread an uncanny, ghostly sense of doom over the whole estate.

A handful of men, the total strength of the revolutionary forces of Rajgarh, were assembled in the Count's diwan in the left wing of the palace, when Lalu arrived from the riverside. The huge room was barely furnished with a simple cotton carpet, two bedsteads, a few chairs, a small table and a sideboard full of whisky and beer bottles, and some twelve-bore cartridges.

'Ah, come and meet the comrades?' the Count said from where he sat on his bed, his hair dishevelled, his big eyes, blood-streaked without the glasses. 'We were just waiting for you.'

Lalu bowed with the exaggerated courtesy of convention, at first to the Count and then to Professor Verma who was smoking as he sat in a greasy old silk dressing gown over shiny pyjamas which had seen the splendour of pre-war student days in Heidelberg. Then he began to explore the shadows which the hand-pulled punkha cast on the faces of the comrades to whom the Count was pointing.

'This is Comrade Ram Din whom you met yesterday,' the Count began in his garrulous manner, referring to the tall man who had been put in charge of the luggage at the station. 'He was in the Bikaner camel corps in the war, and you can see that he looks like a camel, though, lately, he has been protesting too much at loading time. . . .'

Lalu sat down on a chair and faced Comrade Ram Din with a smile.

'And here is Comrade Nandu, murderer and hunter,—I shall now tell you the unique life story of Nandu Babu.' The Count had singled out a black-faced Bengali, whose mouth, red with the copious juice of the betal leaf, certainly made him seem bloodthirsty, though he had the most lively twinkle in his heavy-browed eyes. 'He poisoned his mother when he was aged eleven and ran away from home. Then he took service with a lawyer and despatched him next and ran away again. . . .'

'You have missed out my career as a poacher on the Rajgarh estate when you were as big as my thumb, Maharaj,' Nandu said.

'Of course — and he has been a thief, a rogue, besides being an abducter of other people's wives, and a murderer like you!' the Count mocked.

Lalu was about to protest at the last words when Kanwar Rampal Singh forestalled him.

'You see, Comrade Lal Singh, you have been to a war, and if a person who murders one is a murderer, then one who murders hundreds is not a General, but a murderer. But we shall leave the guest alone for to-day. Meanwhile, there is Comrade Gupta — he is a brother-in-law bania — '

'Oh, Maharaj,' Gupta said, coming forward with a deliberately serious expression on his fair, monkeyish face, with rare blue eyes, which were brimming over with mischief. 'You should have begun by explaining the distinction between the bourgeois orders which includes your family, Professor Verma and such-like and the comrades, the rest of us. . . .'

'Go, brother-in-law, clown, parrot! Professor Verma is a declassed intellectual anyhow!' the Count said, pretending to kick at him. And he continued in his gracious, whimsically humorous tone: 'Here meet another declassed intellectual, Pandit Ram Kumar Misra, Manager of the Printing works of Rajgarh estate, torn between his affection for me and his loyalty to my brother.' And he pointed to a thin little asterik of a figure, who was also chewing a betel leaf which smeared the upper edges of his brave effort at an upright, Rajput moustache . . .'

'You can say what you like, Maharaj,' said Misra. 'You can exalt us to dignity and you can hurl us to the abyss of disrepute.'

'Acha, don't look as if I have called you a traitor!' the Count continued. 'I won't divulge all that about your wife beating you with a broom because you went to bed with the cobbler woman! . . .' But he noticed from the scowl of cold anger on Misra's face that the man was taking umbrage, and he raised his voice to smother the tension, saying: 'A court of rogues, brothers-in-law! — they are all notorious as my bad companions. . . . Anyhow, comrades, the subject of discussion is propaganda among the peasants: the specific task is the issuing of a paper called *Naya Hind.*'

'Nothing can be done,' said Ram Din, 'until the question of money is settled.'

'Especially as the paper will have to be distributed free, as *no peasant can afford to pay a copper, and more especially* because I am going to be appointed as the agant,' said Gupta.

'Go, sála, the son of agant!' shouted the Count.

'What will be the cost of producing four pages, Misra Sahib?' asked Comrade Verma, opening his heavy German leather portfolio before him.

'Sahib, that depends on whether we want new type for the press from Allahabad or whether we can go on with the old lead,' said Misra tentatively.

'You see,' mocked the Count, 'the Manager of the printing press of the great kingdom of Rajgarh has the interest of the masses so much at heart that he thinks he will wangle a new type from us into the bargain!'

Robbed of political innocence and already inured to the subtle distinction that seemed to divide the peoples of the world into two species, *bourgeois* and *comrades*, Lalu wondered, as he sat, like a juggler's monkey with a new red jacket, what it would feel like to be an insidious serpent as Misra seemed to be from the Count's words.

For a moment all was quiet, because the burden of responsibility for finance, as for everything else, fell upon the bourgeoisie. But the chief representative of the order began suddenly

with a solemnity that was the affectation of a lofty air of displeasure:

'Scarcity of men made my father a judge. And I had thought that I had my internal excellence to recommend me. But since I am the only ass among the landlords of Oudh who wishes the destruction of his order, I suppose I shall have to foot the bill. I shall pay the initial outlay. But we should ask brother Birpal Singh if he will pay anything towards the abolition of serfdom. . . . There he is, Ram Din, call him. . . .'

Ram Din leapt across the room, lifted the cane curtain which veiled it from the glare of the sun in the courtyard, and fetched Kanwar Birpal Singh.

The Count's younger brother seemed about ten years older than him, and unsympathetic, because of his handsome, heavy-set, well-groomed presence and the distant look in his almost bulging eyes, the strength of his jaw and the pride of his high forehead. His whole manner seemed to show that his will had never been frustrated.

'Say, friends, have the peasants revolted against the Barons of Oudh yet?' he said with a brief smile as he came in.

'A score of tenants are waiting outside, Maharaj,' said Ram Din. 'They have been evicted from the Nasirabad estate and crave an audience.'

'Here's a chance to stir up a little mire against your old enemies, Birpal,' said the Count. 'And you do nothing but sit over the ledgers like a bania. Where is your Rajput blood gone?'

Kanwar Birpal Singh only smiled discreetly at his brother's way of putting things. He had none of the flighty imagination of his elder brother or his social conscience.

'Acha, do meet Sardar Lal Singh here.' The Count began another line of approach. 'He was one of Barkat Ullah's chums in Germany and has come to uproot your order.' Then he turned to Ram Din and said: 'Go and call those evicted tenants.'

Lalu got up and shook hands with Kanwar Birpal Singh, saying: 'I am your brother's new paid agent, I shall only do what he wishes.'

'I hear that conditions in Punjab are not so good,' Birpal said to Lalu sympathetically.

'But the peasants are organizing themselves there,' Lalu ventured. 'And they are defying the Sarkar.'

'Things are not so bad even in famine times in the Punjab,' Professor Verma put in. 'For, in the Punjab, most of the kisans are peasant proprietors, who own their own plots of land, while here the Sarkar gave land to all who helped them to subjugate the country and created landlords who lease out land to tenants.'

'Comrade, you are again making personal attacks on the ancestors of my honoured brother!' mocked the Count.

'You are right, Verma Sahib, go ahead!' teased the monkey-faced Gupta. 'They are salé bourgeois!'

'Ram Din,' called the Count to his secretary, 'administer number two to this swine!'

'Coming, Maharaj,' Ram Din answered as he returned from the courtyard. And he interpreted the code order by *striking two slaps on the clowning, protesting, though acquiescent*, Gupta's head, while everyone laughed at this strange justice.

At this stage a one-eyed man with a half-naked, black, hairy body, whose poverty was belied by his dignified beard, approached the door in the verandah and stood hesitating by the curtain.

'Come in, come in,' the Count ordered.

Whereupon the one-eyed man gingerly lifted the curtain and began to crawl towards the place where shoes were discarded, with his outstretched hands joined before him, his forehead rubbing the ground, his black face closed in a silent, shrivelled knot of misery above the neat beard, his body dragging on the floor in a way that was both revolting and yet strangely poignant. A host of other pigmy-sized black men crowded in behind him, the whites of their eyes glowing in the black hollows, and their joined hands lifted towards the company, cracked, horny and repellent, and their whole down-at-heel manner an insult to the light.

'Get up! get up!' Kanwar Birpal Singh suddenly shouted.

'Get up and be a man!' And he jumped from the arm of the chair on which he had been seated and lifted the old man, raving: 'What is the matter with you? We landlords don't eat you! Why do you go about whining?'

Trembling with rage as if he were struggling against something in himself, he shook the man and pushed him out of the door, so that all the tenants scattered into the verandah.

Then he came back and again sat precariously balanced on the arm of the chair, stiff, almost insentient and wooden, though his head was hung down in shame.

There was a prolonged silence in the room, during which it seemed that everyone realized the reasons of the manager's failure to sympathize with the abject, one-eyed man. And yet they all felt numbed at the suddenness with which the prince had lost his temper.

Kanwar Birpal Singh looked furtively around for a while. Then he straightened his shoulders and went out.

'There is more air outside,' the Count said after his brother had left. And he led the company on to the verandah.

'This man is from the village of Nasirabad proper,' Ram Din said to encourage the frightened tenants to come forward, as the exalted settled down on wicker chairs. 'He was a share-cropper on two acres of land. He could not pay his rent. So he has been evicted and his plot has been leased out to a tenant of the estate's choosing. . . . The other tenants are of his brotherhood, and, as they protested, they too have been threatened with eviction. . . .'

'Let him speak,' said the Count.

The one-eyed man came forward, put four nickel anna pieces at the Count's feet, according to the custom which the landlord of Nasirabad had established for tenants when they came to air their grievances before him, and then he sat down, his live eye melting with the liquid appeal of tears, his dried, black body shaking as if it were still spellbound with the terror which Kanwar Birpal Singh had infused in him.

'Steady yourself. Why are you weeping so?' said the Count to put him at his ease.

'Maharaj, I am not weeping, but my face is just like that.'

At this there was a burst of laughter.

'Acha, pick up that money; I don't want your charity; come, tell us what the trouble is about?' The Count resumed the inquiry.

'Maharaj, what to say,' the one-eyed man began picking up *the nickels. 'All you exalted Sahibs and afsars are the* same.'

'Come, tell the story, ass!' coaxed Ram Din.

'Let him alone, he will tell me,' said the Count.

'Maharaj, it is true that the hurt of the one-eyed is like the meeting of the accuser and the accused,' began the man, 'but the heavens of oppression have burst upon the Nasirabad estate. And the officials and the landlord have become as one in showering blows upon our heads. . . .'

The company could not restrain their laughter at the one-eyed man's exposition. Even the other tenants, humble victims of life's vengeance, who dared not lift their heads and stare, relaxed into furtive smiles.

'I admit,' said the Count, 'that the rays of the sun are getting much hotter over Nasirabad, but they seem to have sprinkled red pepper on your tongue. . . . What is your name?'

'They call me One-eyed Sukhua, Huzoor,' answered the man. The company roared with the contagion of his natural humour, so common among the oppressed of these parts.

'What exactly happened, Sukhua?' Ram Din hurried him on.

'Maharaj, everything has happened, I am ruined,' One-eyed Sukhua replied with a bitter salty tongue. 'Sahib, how shall I tell you. You are learned folk. You will not understand that a wooden-headed officer like the watchman Bhoori Singh is beyond redemption. He is like an axe that attacks the very forest from which it gets its handle. I paid him a regular bribe for two years. Last year I could not even pay my rent, and there was no money to spare for him. So he employed a ruse. I was cutting the grain in my field. The watchman comes to me and says: "Someone has broken your lock. Report the theft." I ran home and found that my lock

was broken. But not even an earthen pot was touched. I knew it was a trick of Bhoori Singh's, for the blockhead thinks with his heart, which is crooked. So I did not want to report the theft. Whereupon he threatened to make a charge against me at the police thana for withholding information. The only thing that would dissuade him from making a report was fifty rupees, enough to buy a milch cow and a bullock. . . . I had to get a loan to pay him. This year he demanded money again. I had to pay a tax on the marriage of the Nabab Sahib's daughter to Kaptan Effendi Sahib. . . . And I am badly off. . . . So I refused Bhoori. Whereupon he has got the estate office to turn me out of my fields. And now my fields are being ploughed by another tenant, Maharaj, and Bhoori Singh stands there with loins girded. . . .'

'But why didn't you go to the police?' the Count asked.

'Maharaj, blind king-dark city,' said One-eyed Sukhua with disgust. 'The policias agree with him, for, of the fifty rupees they get twenty, the watchman gets twenty, and the accountant of the estate, ten. . . .'

'But surely there is someone else—there must be a just official in Nasirabad?' Professor Verma interrogated as he shyly puffed the end of another cigarette. 'Why the Manager Sahib, Sheikh Hadayat Ullah! . . .'

'There be three kinds of officials, Huzoor, in our land,' said One-eyed Sukhua, 'white brown and black. The white be invisible; the brown more or less visible; the black worst of all, for they mix among the people and know everyone by name. The Manager Sahib is one of them, and therefore a worse pest than the wolf. He is semi-invisible as well as visible, both brown and black. And he can flourish the cane as well as the quill. There were two men in our village who cultivated a holding together, but had no issue and wanted to leave their land in the name of their nephew. The Manager would not write the nephew's name on the paper unless the uncle greased his palm with fifty rupees. And when they had paid this sum, Huzoor, and the name was written in the book it was time to pay again, for the rent was due . . .'

'And what about the landlord?' the Count said, more

because he wanted to hear the one-eyed man's pungent dialect than because he wanted any more facts.

'Maharaj,' said Sukhua, 'you landlord folk send your accountants to collect rent and settle disputes, while you yourselves go eating the air of Lucknow or Vilayat. . . .'

'Yes, they are bourgeois folk,' added Gupta, airing the whole of his gospel and then cutting a caper in anticipation of the punishment which would follow.

'And, you say, the white officials are invisible?' said Lalu to provoke him.

'They are delicate folk, Huzoor,' Sukhua answered, 'and, nowadays, they come in motor-cars, raise a little dust, blind our eyes and go away.'

'I suppose they are here because of their anxiety for the poor!' said the Count mischievously.

'Maharaj, if I stir up the mire, more odours will ooze from it,' commented Sukhua finally.

'Maharaj, God's wrath has fallen upon us,' whined another man from beyond the verandah in a half-incomprehensible murmur of dialect. 'We have nowhere to go, and neither food nor ploughs. . . .' And then he subsided among the doomed around him, as if weighed down by the thunder of centuries.

'The tools were taken away from those others and they were evicted because they sympathized with Sukhua,' confirmed Ram Din.

'Go and wait there in the courtyard,' said the Count. 'We will come and see where your fields are and whether the new occupants can be persuaded to yield them up to you.' And he turned to Ram Din, saying: 'Ask Ganga to hurry up lunch.'

Sukhua was confused as well as inspirited by this unexpected generosity, and looked at himself and his fellow-tenants as if he had scored a great victory. 'Come, brothers,' he said, and led them away towards the neem tree in the palace compound, while Ram Din hurried towards the kitchen.

'Come, let us have a peg, boys,' the Count said as he got up from where the glare of the sun was now singeing the air and kneading everyone into a consistent dough of flesh. . . .

'Hip! hip! hurrah!' cried Gupta, throwing Misra's neat boat cap in the air till his large sacred tuft-knot dangled from one side to the other.

'Hip! Hip!' shouted Nandu, taking advantage of the situation to give Gupta a resounding blow.

And they griped each other in a free fight which scattered the court in wails, cries, shouts and calls of confusion, as at a cock fight which might have been staged for the benefit of the feudal ancestors of Kanwar Rampal Singh.

Lal Singh quickened his steps as he walked down towards the river palace, for he realized that he had left Maya alone for a long time that morning. There was the exhilaration of a peculiar thrill in him through the mingling of neat whisky with his blood and with a lively sense of curiosity about the Count and his riotous court, about the Angrezi words like 'bourgeois,' 'Revolution' and 'Comrade' which they bandied about, and about the whole easy-going, madcap world into which he had been ushered suddenly.

The aromatic incense of smouldering thup assailed his nostrils from the group of temples, beyond the palace on the riverside. And he stood, for a moment, smiling to himself about the weird, monotonous ritual of tingling bells and chanted hymns with which he knew religion was confounded in his country. Then he laughed at himself for laughing at religion, in the way in which he had done in his youth at Nandpur, and he plucked a stalk from the shady tamarind tree at the gate of the river house. For he had grown up from the days when he made profane gestures and scoffed at the greybeards of his village. His life during the past few years had left him few illusions, and the days had gone when he felt everything as a personal affront levelled at him. His experience was forcing him to forget all his own grievances and to fight for others. This strange job of helping to bring about Revolution, to gather the peasants in a union, so that they could defend themselves against the assaults of their enemies, the officials and the landlords, fairly well defined his own yearnings whatever the word 'Revolution' might mean to others....

The stalk of tamarind he had plucked showed that the fruit was not ripe. He tasted it, then spat out the sour husk with a wry face and began to walk down the slope of the courtyard up the stairs to the verandah. He felt excited about the grand house in which he was living, and enthusiastic that he had already become embroiled in the jolly world of the comrades, and already got acclimatized to the atmosphere of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. He had compared and contrasted the opinions and characters of the various people he had been introduced to at Kanwar Rampal Singh's, and he warmed to the new life. Of course, he felt, he would have difficulty in adapting himself to the work he had to do, because, apart from an instinctive grasp of the fact that something was wrong, he needed the strength of a more enlightened will to approximate himself to the work for the noble ideal of Revolution. How to — and first, there was another more immediate difficulty so far as he was concerned. There, he could see her at the window of the balcony as he ascended the stairs — Maya.

The way she stood there, wistful and alone, her head bent in a melancholy curve over the river, made him feel guilty: the very shadow of her seemed to have the power to lacerate him. . . .

He was about to run up to her and catch her unawares and kiss her, but, before he could reach her, she looked round at him with a hard, accusing stare, then averted her eyes and began to wipe the tears off her face with the end of her head-cloth.

'Maya, childling, what is the matter?' he gasped as he rushed to her.

But she stood there, her shoulders drooping, her body bent and rigid, as if she were a mother weeping over the dead body of her first hope.

'Maya,' he said, patting her on the shoulders.

'Where have you been?' she said, still looking away from him.

'Oh, planning the Revolution!' he said, mocking at himself. 'An evil Sarkar, they say, is like bad salt.'

'The bad salt is in the tongues of people who smoke and

drink,' she said. She had been inured to look upon the Sarkar, whom her father served so loyally and from whom he had got his titles and lands, as sacred, and she had been schooled by her Guru-Granth-reading superior mother to abominate the peasants who drank to drown their sorrows.

'The bad salt is also in your tears, my rain cloud,' he said laughing.

'Why did you bring me here, if you had to treat me like this?' she shrieked in a hard voice. 'Here I am imprisoned in a room, in this desolate house. And you come home smelling like the drain of the cobblers' lane in Nandpur!'

'I trusted your woman's first instinct,' he said, coming closer to her, so as to touch her and melt the reproachful obstinacy in her tone.

'Then why drag me through the thorns?' she burst out as she turned round, her ivory face an angry pale, her lips almost milk white.

'Accept the bitter, woman, fear the sweet!' he said. And then he stammered naïvely in a rage. 'I have come to help to convert this prison into a free land like Roos, where there are no divisions of religion or property among people, where women, who were sold to the highest bidder, have become free to choose their own lives, where . . .'

'I have no wish to change the world,' she said, raising her eyes like a cat suddenly startled in her sleep. 'I want to live my own life.'

'Childling!' he exclaimed as if he wanted to rescue her from the obstinacy of her manner, as if he still hoped to change her.

'Don't caress me if you don't want to give me the dignity with which I could appear before the Raj Mata or any of the women of the village!' she said.

So she was not content to live in his eyes as he had been ready to build his life in hers. She wanted to live in the eyes of the world and she wanted dignity — marriage. He had been tortured by the thought of it. After the excitement of the night when she had come to him in Gughi's room, after the naked togetherness of their senses, the memories of the past humiliations at her father's hand had come to him, tinged by the fear of

responsibility which might accrue from the happiness they had shared together. But he had said to her, 'You won't go away from me,' and she had acquiesced with a bent-headed silence which showed that she was both shocked at the open manner of his loving and surprised that he harboured no resentment against her. She had expected that he would never want to see her again. But whatever he had felt afterwards he could hardly have refused to take responsibility for her, as she had begged him to take her away. Only, after the accomplishment of love, she wanted marriage, even as she had demanded love because she was used to parting her hair, English-fashion, on the side. That was her conception of freedom, and, in order to achieve it, she had turned her love for him into the will to live her own life in her own way, and to make him live according to that way. . . .

'Come, Maya,' he implored her, compelled by the hardening of her will almost to surrender.

But she stood, rigid and stubborn, yet pathetically pale against the black cloth on her head. There was a scent of violets on the crumpled, sweat-covered neck of her fashionably frilled tunic, which made her ignorance seem like the helpless innocence of a sick person. . . . Even as he had started off from Nandpur he had felt that he was carrying a heavier pack on his back than the mere haversack, and that it was inevitable that the adventure he had undertaken would be attended by all kinds of misfortunes. He knew that Maya did not know anything of the work he was going to do. The intense hauteur and indignation which was concentrated in the stern cast of her face, especially in the tightly closed lips, betokened contempt for him. But how could she understand, he said to himself, pitying her so that he almost laughed at her: she, born in the sheltered home of one of the richest men in the Punjab, a landlord and an aristocrat, she, who had never, in spite of her disillusionment at being left a widow at seventeen and her suffering at the hands of her mother-in-law, understood the causes of sadness in the world. . . .

The planes on which they had begun to live were so different, the distances which Lalu had covered, since his eyes first met

hers, were so vast that they could not share their doubts and fears and regrets. And yet they were together, the smell of their bodies mingled so easily, and this togetherness was their only escape from loneliness. . . .

'Maya,' he said, gathering her in a rough embrace with a nervous laugh.

'Leave me alone,' she shrieked, and she sprang out of his grasp, her whole body tingling, as she seemed to say, 'don't touch me!'

'What is the matter, childling?' he asked impatiently, as if he were knocking his head against the dead wall of her will, afraid yet angry.

'I want my status,' she burst out. 'I am not a prostitute. . . .'

'You stupid slave,' he raved, and, before he knew what he had done, he slapped her on the head as if he had been teaching her a lesson at school.

The blow was hard even against his will.

Maya reeled in a semicircle with an hysterical moan, her self-will broken.

His sudden revulsion against her had equally suddenly turned into a burst of tenderness. She was pitiable and helpless as she sobbed, innocent like a child, whose obstinacy was partly a reaction against him and partly the unconscious malice of sheer stupidity, pathetic and hopeless.

How could he be such a brute as to hit her? How could he be so callous? And yet he felt determined to stamp all the weakness out of himself, and he thought that he had really struck a blow at himself, a blow for all that he knew, for all that should make him firm in his new purpose.

But he felt ashamed of himself. Her flesh was warm and her tears damped his neck as he pressed his face against hers. And he was overcome by an importunate fear and love for her helplessness. After all, she had been brave and had run away with him, and she must feel alone. He had brought her so far away from home. . . .

Suddenly a drum struck up the worship hour outside the temple, a hundred yards away, and the crowd of evicted tenants, who lay about the shrine and lived on charity, rushed up to

the steps, as if they had gone mad. Lalu suddenly snapped his fingers as if he had been electrified. He laughed an embarrassed laugh at the ridiculous seriousness with which he had invested so warm and light a thing as Maya, pulled her down and fell to caressing her, smothering her face, her neck, her hair, her eyes, in sheer abandon, so that she stopped sobbing and could not help breaking into a smile. Then he got up and, leaving her in a fluster, made to go.

'Are you going to confess your sins, you unbeliever?' Maya taunted. 'Or are you going to tempt those men away?'

'God's work is so well done that man could take a few lessons from it,' he said, rushing out as if he had suddenly become a maniac.

As he emerged from the river house, through the shade of the tamarind tree, remorse for his own failings assailed him. He realized that the reason why he had never been able to control his destiny was because he had been weak and undecided about everything in his own mind. Ever since his youth in the village he had been forced by circumstances to live outside himself, so that he had merely drifted along not knowing what to do. Now that he had come up against some obstruction to the idea of marriage in his own nature, he asked himself what he really wanted. . . . But who was he to decide this question one way or the other? For, though he found himself clinging tenaciously to himself, he knew that he had no faith in himself; that, apart from a nature shaped by stress, he had no character to cling to, that his prejudice against marriage, for instance, was the result of his abhorrence of the arranged marriage of his eldest brother, Sharam Singh, and the failure of Dayal Singh's betrothal. . . .

Perhaps, he felt, it was this lack of faith in himself that had made him abandon the idea of living his own life and throw himself into this peasant work, a kind of escape from the necessity to face up to himself and the family troubles, the reproaches of the neighbours in Nandpur and the pangs of his own conscience. Though, hadn't his family brought him up to think that the highest aim of life was the service of others,

devotion to one's brethren? And did not all the circumstances of his life force him to mingle his own distress with the sufferings of others, to root out evil, to give battle to all the forces which crushed the peasants, to the powerful who tyrannized over the weak? . . .

And yet,—he couldn't help casting a backward glance on himself, as if, turning downcast from his high enterprise, he heard whispers from the survivals of all the secret, hidden impulses of his past, which seemed to say, 'not so fast, my friend, not so fast; do not betray us. . . .'

But so interested was he in the immediate plan to go and help the evicted peasants at Nasirabad that he drowned his guilt about Maya. She seemed a hindrance in the way of his work, a responsibility of the desires of those days when he had still wished for his own happiness and thought that he could drive his bullock-cart through the world and exploit it for his own purposes. He would muddle along anyhow, he now decided, and he was too stubborn to notice that he was being irresponsible. . . .

Skirting round the walls of the palace compound, he heard Ram Kumar Misra calling after him from the twisted temple lane: 'Where are you hurrying? Where?'

Lalu stopped and looked round at the printer, who had a brass jug in his hand and was repeating some holy verses devoutly as he jogged along.

'Whither, Sahib?' Misra repeated, with a shrewd look that bespoke a meddlesome inquisitiveness.

'Has the Kanwar Sahib gone with those tenants?' Lalu asked.

'Aré nahin, Sahib, they must be having their siesta!' answered Misra with a bold contempt for the exalted in his voice.

'How will your hymns keep you pure if you don't wrap your sacred thread round your ears when you go to relieve yourself?' said Lalu mischievously as they began to walk towards the palace.

'Only the Sanatanis do that,' Misra said. 'I am a member of the Ayra Samaj . . . !'

For a moment, they walked along silently, as they were both conscious of a certain temperamental antagonism. Then, as

they were getting into the compound of the palace, Misra turned to Lalu ingratiatingly and said:

'Tell me, Sahib, why didn't you bring back a Mem Sahib from Vilayat? And did you make lots of money there?'

'Money!' Lalu said evasively. 'Everyone prays that his own cup may be full, but manna doesn't fall from heaven. . . .'

'Kanwar Rampal Singh has got a woman there. I am sure,' Misra said, pumping for information. 'And we think that he is waiting for her to arrive. . . .'

'Really!' Lal Siagh was interested because this was a revelation to him.

'He is badly entangled,' Misra continued. 'He already has a wife and two children living away in Lucknow. She was a very pious woman and he drinks and eats beef.'

Lalu had not suspected such malice in Misra as that with which the count had charged him while introducing the Arya Samajist in the morning. He had come, through the piety of his own home, utterly to despise the lies and mendacity which hurt someone's reputation or feelings. And he was relieved when they got to the door of Kanwar Rampal Singh's room.

'What have you two been conspiring about?' the Count asked, as he looked up from where he lay in bed.

'We have been talking of Religion, Revolution, Wine, Women, Money and Marriage and all the other burning issues of the hour!' said Lalu hyperbolically.

'Why, does Misra want you also to join the new Hindu fraternity of the Arya Samaj, and to have your union with your woman regularised?' the Count mocked.

'Maharaj, this is unkind of you,' said Misra. 'The Arya Samaj does not force anyone . . .'

'Then why does it insist,' said the Count, 'that the only way in which I can get my Jewess to come here is if I promise to marry her under Arya Samaj rites?'

'I came to ask when we were going out?' Lalu said.

'Say, Verma Sahib, when will you be ready for the fray?' the Count called to the Professor who sat reading Rousseau, even as he scribbled notes in a microscopic hand-writing on

diminutive pieces of paper, which were piled on the dressing-table by his leather portfolio.

'Hoon!' Professor Verma turned startled yet smiling from his sweating absorption.

'I suppose, when you have made up your mind about Democracy,' the Count added in answer to his own question. And then he sat up in bed and, facing Lalu, said: 'I have heard a flying rumour, friend, that the girl you have brought with you feels self-conscious about her present indefinite status. I have also heard a flying rumour that there are others who are righteously indignant that you are not married to her. I think there is a flying rumour that the law isn't too tolerant towards erring mortals. . . . If I may give you a piece of advice, garnered from my own bitter experiences, let these fools marry you off. I will stand you a bottle of whisky to get drunk on so that you can go through the ceremony. Since you have already swallowed the camel you will not strain at the tail. And that will put an end to all gossip. . . .'

'Maharaj!' protested Misra.

'Besides,' said the Count airily after having driven home the dagger into the Arya Samajist, though he knew that the man had a tough skin: 'A woman is a thing of nerves. And the only way in which she manages to hang together is by hanging on to a man. . . . Except, of course, that man is not so self-sufficient either, however cocksure he may be. He can bear anything, everything, except the tragedy of the bed-chamber . . .' With this he got up and, wheeling round in an embarrassed, awkward movement, began to pace up and down the room. . . .

Lalu let the situation simmer in him. From the day of his early recoil he had hated the thought of marriage. And the German girls he had known had given him a taste for illicit relationships. For, somehow, he had been released from the obstructions in his own nature through his indulgences, the tissues of his thighs had softened in yielding to the ultimate secret. And he had become unused, in the abandon of these moments, to the sense of responsibility, afraid. . . . Now the prig in him seemed to be recoiling against the weakness in his

nature. He would make a virtue of necessity; he would become a martyr. The Count was a diamond in the rough, and his advice was categorical.

'I will accept the bottle of whisky,' he said, his underlip trembling as if he were swallowing a bitter pill.

'Never mind,' the Count said. 'If we ever want to use religion we shall have to let religion use us now and then.'

'How truly said!' Ram Kumar Misra complimented the Count, his face flushed with the sense of victory.

'Acha, now we must get ready to go,' the Count said. And he called: 'Ganga, abé Ganga, come and give me some water, I want a bath to cool myself.'

The Count's toilet was prolonged, partly through the dilatoriness of his personal servant, on whom the effect of his master's injunctions to hurry with the preparation of the bath seemed to produce an appreciably slower tempo, partly through the unconscionable amount of time the nervous, thin Babu Doctor of the Rajgarh cottage dispensary took in giving injections to Kanwar Rampal Singh to lessen the pain of a complicated bone in his nose which wanted cauterizing, partly through the simple cup of tea the Count thought it well they should drink before departing, but mainly through the hesitancies and scruples of Professor Verma in being persuaded to come to the disputed fields.

At length the Count, Professor Verma and Lal Singh emerged from the palace, crossed the Ganges by ferry and walked along towards the scene behind One-eyed Sukhua, who had come to direct them.

'I am beginning to prefer the good old methods of our ancestors in settling disputes between landlords and tenants,' said the Count, striding along the sandy track and inspired to a sudden alacrity as if by the imminence of the battle. 'If the peasants want to flourish they ought to swing the axe and grasp their happiness. . . .'

'Since every man has only one life to live,' said Professor Verma, 'it is hardly worth while murdering Napoleon whose rule can only last as long as he lives, especially as it means

invoking the hangman's rope round one's own neck. But it may be eminently worth while to combat landlordism, which might last for generations if the Government does not devise some tenancy legislation to alleviate the life of the peasantry. . . .'

'Maharaj,' said One-eyed Sukhua, running along almost in front of the exalted even as he sought to tell them of the iniquity beyond them, 'there is that watchman Bhoori Singh on my fields, protecting the new tenants. He says that the Patwari will come if I put a foot on the field. . . .'

Lalu could not distinguish the victims and victimisers among the clots of men in the fields by the village from this distance.

'It is not these local rumpets, it is the Angrezi Sarkar!' exhorted the Count.

'Maharaj,' said Sukhua, falling away as if he were deeply hurt at this. 'I have the reputation of being greatly interested in politics in this village. . . .'

'Ah, just like me!' said the Count, laughing. 'Perhaps, because both of us schooled ourselves to be good listeners rather than talkers!'

'But really, Maharaj,' insisted Sukhua, 'the Sahibs are kind and just. Only, when they come, they being Hindustani bearers and chaprasis, who make friends with our watchman and demand flour and pulses. It is always one Hindustani who is at the throat of another. . . . That watchman there is the son of the Devil himself! He can even throw dust in the eyes of God! Last week he went and knocked at the door of the widow Bhadra, who does a little procuring in the village. Showing her the motor-car of some friends of the Nabab who had come to visit him, he said it was the carriage of two officers who had come to arrest her, and that he could settle it with them on her behalf for ten rupees. That bitch was all in a flutter and gave him the sum, so that she could breathe freely. . . .'

'And so that she could resume the noble profession of procuress again,' added the Count. 'Wah, what to say?'

'I tell you, Maharaj, it is this watchman and that Patwari! There they are.' And he shrank back like a dog with his tail between his legs.

But to Lal Singh the prospect did not seem frightening,

though he could now see a great many men scattered on the fringes of the disputed field which a peasant was ploughing with a team of two well-fed bullocks. The village of Nasirabad seemed an oasis in the sandy desert along the river-bank, as its palm-groves arose from the rich dense growth of young wheat and berley all around, and put into relief the splendid lotus dome of a mosque with four minarets and the battlements of the Nasirabad palace.

'This is like mangal in the jungle,' he said, struck by the splendour of the view.

'You wait *till* you come to the village itself!' said the Count, screwing up his nose.

They walked silently on for a while as they approached the field. Now it seemed like a pitch cleared for some local sport, as almost the whole population of the village seemed to be gathered around it to see the fun.

'That is Bhoori Singh, the watchman, Huzoor; he and his men have got staves in their hands!' shrilled One-eyed Sukhua as he pointed to a few straggling men at the near end of the field. And, stricken with terror and almost paralysed by some horror of his imagining, he lay down before Kanwar Rampal Singh and caught his legs, shrieking: 'There, Maharaj, they have threatened me; they have even taken possession of my hut; there, protector of the poor, save me! . . . .' -

'Get up, no one will hurt you,' the Count assured him. And, extricating his legs from Sukhua's grasp, he strode forward, staring from under the shadow of his upraised palm across the glare to size up the situation.

Westwards, right under the slanting rays of the sun, from the foreground of the village, came more lumps of men, streaming towards the field, intent and concentrated on the shimmering suspense which towered like an elemental doom over their heads, which flickered in the abrupt gestures of their hands and legs, which hovered before their black eyes and yet escaped their grasp. For no one seemed to know what form this tamasha would take. They had heard that One-eyed Sukhua, the share-cropper, had been evicted by the watchman. There was nothing new in that, because, others before Sukhua, and

his betters, had had to vacate their lands, and had gone, just evaporated, migrated to far Calcutta and Bombay, or turned beggars in the city of Agra, where the tourists to the Taj Mahal distributed money with a prodigality which was heavenly; or they had turned farm labourers on other estates. No, eviction was nothing strange in these days of famine, specially for a sharecropper or landless labourer. Why, even the great tenant farmers, who were hereditary ryots, could not till their small holdings to advantage nowadays and were fast sub-letting their land to the moneylenders, or to the rich folk from the city, getting into arrears to the landlord and sub-letting more land or contracting debt, dwindling to the position of owning nothing but an earthen pitcher and a rag on their backs like their own rack-rented sub-tenants. So how could a rack-rented sharecropper or landless labourer, cultivating the fields of his masters with the obligation to pay half the rent, endure, if the prices of crops were falling like landslides on the hills. But rumour had gone round that One-eyed Sukhua had appealed to Kanwar Rampal Singh of Rajgarh for help to restore to him his bit of holding. . . . And, on the other hand, Bhoori Singh, the watchman, had been seen exercising in the morning, lifting the wooden dumb-bell in order to summon enough strength into his limbs for the fray. So they had come, goaded by their curiosity, just to see how the new element in the situation would effect the fate of One-eyed Sukhua, some out of the pleasure it gave them to see this eccentric in trouble, others because they knew it might be their turn next. Perhaps Sukhua's new patron would to-day show them the way out of their difficulties. . . .

' "Bolo Kanwar Rampal Singh ki jai" ' some of them shouted to greet the Count as he advanced.

The Count lifted his hand to quieten them and proceeded, smiling.

Suddenly, some of the sympathizers of One-eyed Sukhua could be seen hurrying towards the Count.

Equally suddenly, Bhoori Singh, a strong, well-set Gurkha, and his men, could be seen running behind them with wild cries of 'Pakro, pakro, salon ko!'

At this, as if at the giving of a word of command, the whole drab, easygoing crowd of sightseers seemed to be galvanized into activity. Some ran and gave chase, others shouted, others still raised their hands in horror; and the entire earth before the village seemed to wake from its trance of silence and ring with shrill accents and the rubbings of uncouth forms in combat.

Before the friends of One-eyed Sukhua had advanced very far, the watchman and his colleagues had felled them with swift blows of staves, on their backs, on their shins, on their ankles, hard, rasping blows, which fell on the warm, airless atmosphere with the dull thudding song of flawless bamboos, mingled with the monstrous heaving of throats intoxicated with power and abuse too foul even for their own tearing voices.

But the combat was not finished. For the men who had been at work in nearby fields flocked towards the disputed ground; women, who were gathering fuel or making cow-dung cakes outside their houses, shrieked where they stood and invoked all the adults to go and stop the bloodshed. And Bhoori Singh, anticipating a riot, ran round, waving his stave high in the air to overawe the populace into scattering away from the scene.

One-eyed Sukhua had come up and, catching the Count's feet, grovelled in the dust before him; Professor Verma was pale with anger at the spectacle of such violence; while Lalu ran impetuously to wrest the stave out of Bhoori's hand.

Before he got anywhere near the watchman, two young boys were already tackling Bhoori. One of them, about fourteen, went for his waist, and the other, about nineteen, for his legs. The watchman, however, dragged them with him, kicking them with the thick artillery boots he wore and wriggling to get out of their grasp. They held fast. So he began to strike them with the steel end of his stave and they fell away.

'Oh cruel dog!' a woman's cry arose in the liquid sunshine, metallic like the agonized shriek of a mother bird who sees her young one shot.

But now the demon in Bhoori had risen with the doubled

wrath of a monster provoked by the resistence to its will. And he lashed out blindly with his stave, as if he were whirling the weapon in a void, and he ran in a kind of mad war dance, now for a group of men hear, now for a group there.

'Abé, look! look! I have done nothing!'

'Come to your senses!'

'Aré God, I am undone!'

The voices of innocent and guilty arose alike. But without a word, silent and grim, as if he were shaping himself into the mould of cruelty, he persisted with a terrible, obstinate will, his body rising like a gigantic menace over the landscape as the men and women ran, fell away or ducked their heads, yards ahead of the pressure of the stave.

Then a young horseman could be seen galloping up from the village, and the men scattered faster than ever. The rider, however, made straight for Bhoori, pulled up and snatched the stave from the watchman's hand.

For a moment, the whole earth seemed to be waiting, as if on the eve of another long vengeance on men.

'Is this justice,that a man can run amok and beat up people without anyone stopping him?' Lalu burst out angrily at the horseman.

'Where is the Kanwar Sahib?' the young man asked, dipping his palm with the elegance of the courtly manner.

Lalu merely stared at him, as the boy wore a peaked cap, a silk tunic and Jodhpurs and looked the acme of exalted Sahib-hood.

But the boy rode up towards the Count and said: 'Nawab Sahib has asked me to request you to grace our house for tea.'

'I have never heard of the lion lying down with the lamb,' Lalu mumbled under his breath at this hospitality.

'There may be something in going,' Professor Verma urged. 'For if he refuses to take the tenants back we can join issue.'

'Come, Kanwar Sahib,' the son of the Nawab insisted with an exaggerated, effeminate courtesy.

'I hope you won't poison the sweets you offer us, Mr. Jamal,' the Count answered. 'After the exploits of that watch-

man there one doesn't know what will happen if one walks into the lion's den.'

'Aji, nahin, is this any talk?' Mr. Jamal replied. 'That man will be taken to task, I assure you. . . .'

'Oh, bey, you go back to Rajgarh,' the Count ordered One-eyed Sukhua. 'We will cover your retreat. . . .'

'Permit me to take my leave,' said Mr. Jamal, pulling at the bit of his restive charger after they had gone a little distance together. 'I shall go and inform them that you are coming.' And, before they could tell him that they did not know the way, he had cantered off.

They stared at each other with a common look of bafflement, but persevered, with swarms of peasants around them, who looked at them now as if they were wondrous, new stud elephants which the Nawab had bought.

As they reached the mud-walled houses, with courtyards full of sloppy troughs, by which stood emaciated cattle bespattered by black soil from rivulets of drains over which the mosquitoes whined, more people came out to welcome them with raised arms and joined hands.

'Where is the big house?' the Count asked, acknowledging their greetings.

'I will guide them,' offered a ridiculous little naked boy whose penis, swathed in bandages after circumcision, dangled between his legs like a sparrow.

And there was a chorus of other courteous offers of help which woke up the fowls roosting in the sloping roofs of houses in Humble Lane, so that the whole village knew that guests had arrived for some festival in the palace, and crumbs could be expected soon to fall off the table, which would provide children with salted lentils and bits of pastries for their hungry eyes and greedy palates.

'I shall guide them,' said a bold Muhammadan, clad in a flimsy starched muslin cap, with no shirt except sweat, a pair of tight white trousers and colourful velvet shoes.

The guests passed through an intricate mesh of lanes and bye-lanes behind the guide from Humble Lane, amid the

admiration of peasant women who stood behind torn jute curtains in their dung-strewn gullies, till they reached the shadow of the lotus-domed mosque, not in the least splendrous now, but a mouldering grey ruin, with a clean courtyard where the devout were performing their sit-down and stand-up jerks, broken and bruised by the draughts of time.

The guide hesitated for a moment and mumbled something about a short-cut through the mosque, which was not usable, however, because prayers were going on, and then darted into a fifty-foot long alley, from the damp smells of which they appeared before the enormous gates of a structure whose ruins hinted, even as the ruins of the mosque, at a past which was not without glory.

'Abdul, aré Abdul,' the guide shouted.

And a couple of bulldogs leashed to iron chains in the hall barked back furiously, as they strained with all the might of their stiff necks and frightening jowls to get free and go for the strangers.

Aefore Abdul appeared, there came a raucous-voiced, middle-aged man with a full upturned moustache and greying hair, dyed blue-black, wrapped in a Kashmir dressing gown, light pyjamas and pump shoes.

'May I pay my respects to you,' the Count said.

'Ah, come, come, Kanwar Sahib!' greeted the Nawab, stretching his accents in long-drawn moans of courtesy, so that his voice sounded like that of an old, slightly broken but renewed sitar. 'Come, it has cooled my eyes to see you after such long years. Wah, wah, you have grown to be the absolute image of your uncle, Raja Rampal Singh! Come, my heart is filled with such gladness to see you. As the poet felt when he said of aspiration:

'Haste, haste, for we too, O Soul, are coming
From this world of severence to that world of union. . . .'

And he stretched his hands to the Count and dragged him into his embrace, with a crackling laugh which was echoed by the high roof of the dusty, cobwebbed hall.

'My friends, Verma Sahib and Sardar Lal Singh,' said the Count. 'They were both in Germany with me.'

'Ah, what to say, Sahibs, come, come to my humble abode,' boomed the Nawab, shaking hands with them warmly. 'Come, though the outside of this old palace be oriental I have a few apartments decorated in European style, just to suit the tastes of guests like you. Come and grace us. . . .'

'Your grace goes first,' the Count said, standing back.

'Ah, no, Kanwar Birpal Singh — no! Come!'

'But, Nawab Sahib, you are our elder and by all the laws of reverence . . .' the Count said. 'We will follow you.'

'Aré, no, how can it even be so! Even if I am your elder, you are my honoured guests!' The Nawab flourished his hands.

'Please, Nawab Sahib, don't trouble yourself,' the Count said. 'You proceed first.'

'Ah, but how could I offer such an affront to such exalted guests as you three gentlemen,' the Nawab began. 'Especially after you have tasted the life of Vilayat and . . .'

The Count decided to accept defeat in this war of courtesy, and, beckoning his companions, proceeded under the gaze of the servants, the retainers and the hidden eyes of the Zenana, through the courtyard.

As they crossed the compound and came to the door of an inner sanctum, the Nawab took the lead into a large with-drawing room, furnished in the mixed English styles of the last hundred years, with gold-framed Regency chairs which rubbed shoulders with a red-leather settee, which itself backed on to a huge carved-oak Victorian sideboard and glass-windowed bookcases, on which were spread an assortment of photographs of the Nawab Sahib himself taken during the Edwardian and Georgian eras.

'It ees rather hot,' the Nawab Sahib began, breaking into English suddenly, 'So I have had the tea laid out in the verandah, overlooking the garden; some other guests are there . . .' And, before leading them, he turned towards a window with iron bars and called: 'Abdul, bring the tea.'

Ushered into a low verandah, which spread out, beyond two steps, to a colourful array of flower-pots up to a low wall, beyond which showed the crumbling ruins of village mud houses, they found themselves in a veritable garden of Eden.

'Kanwar Sahib,' the Nawab said, 'you know Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, the Manager of my estate, he was your class fellow at the Canning College in Lucknow, and you have met my son Jamal just returned from Cambridge, — but there is my son-in-law Captain Effendi, Superintendent of police, the most civilized man I know. . . .'

After ceremonial bows, handshakes and introductions, and more ceremonial bows and exchanges of courtesy to decide who should sit where, they all spread themselves on wicker, cane and deck chairs, in varying degrees of comfort.

'As I don't take tea I have started with the bile mixture,' the Nawab said, pointing to a decanter of whisky. 'So forgive me.' And then he turned in his armchair and shouted 'Abdul, oh, bey Abdul!'

Then, blowing his cheeks full, he puffed out a hot breath, saying: 'The limit has been reached — this heat and it is hardly yet April — May!'

'Perhaps if you had those crumbling houses levelled down, there would be more air,' said Lal Singh, genuinely struck by the incongruity of this elaborate palace with the uninhabited broken mud houses on its fringes.

'Aji, "happy the moment, when we are seated in the palace," as the poet says,' the Nawab waxed poetical again, 'what matters the outside. . . .'

'The tenants who left these houses and the land in disrepair will have to be hunted down,' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, the young estate manager, a tall, dark man with a face and bearing modelled on Douglas Fairbanks, except that his handsome frame was flawed by his lame left leg. 'What about helping us to trace the illegally begotten budmashes, Captain Effendi?'

The most civilized man, a fair complexioned man with a large bald forehead, lifted his grey eyes, which he had kept respectfully hung down in the face of his father-in-law, and answered slowly, discreetly: 'The eagle does not pursue flies.'

'So the tenants invoke your sympathy as they excite the pity of the Communists,' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah with a nervous laugh. But Captain Effendi was a man of few words and less

thoughts: so he didn't answer, sitting where he was, empty yet tangible.

'Waste, waste!—that is the chief sin of the tenant,' said Mr. Jamal. 'There is nothing in which the North European peasant differs so much from the Indian than in this: "God's work was well done, man's badly," says the Hindustani and leaves whole areas to nature's caprices. "God helps those who help themselves," says the European, and measures his profit in terms of the increasing knowledge of soils and crops he cultivates. . . . Waste, waste, waste! There is waste from the depredations of pests, there is waste from the use of infertile seed, there is waste of manure, there is waste in the uses to which various crops are put! . . . The whole thing is a waste! . . .' The boy's face was flushed with embarrassment, almost as if he were impatient with the heat and at having pronounced so direct an utterance in the presence of his father.

'Abdul, bring the tea!' the Nawab shouted again.

'Oh, Jamal,' said Hadayat Ullah patronizingly, 'you can't help blushing every time you utter a word! You are not at Cambridge now, so leave all those bookish theories. Peasants all over the world are the same. If anything, the Indian peasant knows more than most men of his tribe.'

'But Sheikh Sahib!' Jamal, the modernist, exploded. 'You know very well that cotton seed is fed to cattle in a crude form which is beyond the power of the animals to digest. In Europe they extract short fibres which can be used to make felt for hats; the husk is decorticated to form a fuel; the kernel is crushed to separate oil for cooking or for making soap; the remaining cake is used for cattle to eat or for manure. . . .'

'Only a nation of shopkeepers could think of all that,' said Hadayat Ullah.

'Yes,' the Count jeered, 'we prefer to burn our excess cotton!'

'We have learnt that from the English!' added Verma with dry irony.

'They have learnt a few things from us,' said the Nawab in his large, slow, rather lavish style. 'I was looking at Havelock Ellis' *Psychology of Sex*. But it is little more than a paraphrase

of the *Kama Sutra*, especially when it comes to postures. . . .'

At this the whole company laughed.

'Can I borrow it, Nawab Sahib?' said Hadayat Ullah, flippant for a moment.

'What do you young men want to read Havelock Ellis for?' said the Nawab in a caressive, indulgent voice now. 'All these things come naturally to you boys, with the pressure of the blood, it is old folks like me who need the aid of stimulants. . . . Isn't that so, son?'

Lalu warmed to the old lecher, who was so free and easy in his manner, so cultured, so warm and human, in spite of his exalted rank and position.

Mr. Jamal, who seemed to have anglicized himself completely through Sherborne and Cambridge, could not accept this kind of frankness, especially from his father, and smiled even as he got redder.

'Oh, Abdul, oh, bey, son of Abdul, I shall kill you . . .' the Nawab shouted, as if he had been suffering for ages from his own infirmity and the inattention of servants.

But at last Abdul, the yellow-eyed Khansamah with a French beard, a dirty tunic and tennis shoes, was already on the way to the verandah. He came and laid down a large tray with a none too shiny silver tea set, some sugary pastries, cake, and a dishful of fried and seasoned maize-flour dumplings.

'Ah, ah, the pukoras!' Nawab Sahib exclaimed, now elated. 'That was what I was waiting for! They make the bile mixture go down the easier! . . . Now, gentlemen, you have the choice: you can have tea or you can join me and begin with this more potent liquid. Those hot pukoras go with it. . . .'

'Now that you have mentioned it,' said the Count. 'I will plump for the "bile-mixture."'

'Ah, that is said like a true landlord!' the Nawab said.

'Tea for me, please,' said Professor Verma abruptly.

'Yes, it is rather early for whisky,' put in Mr. Jamal tentatively, for he still stuck to his English routine of five meals at their proper times.

'Tea!' exclaimed Captain Effendi like a bullet from his revolver of a mouth. 'The Sahibs will have tea, Abdul, so

pour it for them,' directed the Nawab. 'And yourself, Sardar Lal Singh?'

Lalu laughed shyly at this special attention and, not knowing how to behave in this company but drawn by the forbidden pleasure, said: 'Whisky.'

'That was said like a true Jat,' the Count complimented his companion.

Abdul began to serve the guests, the black, ash-smeared stumps of his fingers imprinting suspicious marks on the cups. Sheikh Hadayat Ullah noticed that Jamal was uneasy.

'Go away and wash your hands, son of a swine!' he said disgustedly. 'Go, I shall serve the tea '

The Khansamah was taken by surprise and, in spite of the fact that his hide was thick enough from the habitual abuse heaped on him, his hands trembled and he dropped the hot silver teapot, which slightly splashed the tray.

'You blind ass,' roared the Nawab. 'Get out of here. Fool!'

Abdul withdrew, sheepishly, stumbling and afraid.

As Sheikh Hadayat Ullah began to pour milk into the already poured tea, the thick cream of boiled milk fell into the cups and made a greasy, scummy brew.

'I think I shall have a peg, too!' said Jamal, with a casual smile and a rather wistful voice, afraid to drink in his father's presence.

'That is the spirit,' the Nawab complimented his son almost as if he was initiating him into the secret of a new free masonry.

'I, too,' said Verma.

'Oh, where is the sugar?' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah. 'No sugar! Oh, Abdul, son of a donkey by a mule. Son of a dog! Seed of an owl! Come here. . . . Look, Nawab Sahib, how many times has this illegally begotten been told to stand by in case we want something! For if he brings milk he forgets the sugar! I don't know why you won't dismiss him?'

'Permit me to get you what you want,' said Captain Effendi, who had preserved a respectful filial silence all this while and had sat twirling his moustache.

'Aji, these stupid village folk, akh!' said Jamal, 'You can't train an owl to do the work of a Khansamah! Oh, this un-

civilized, crude Hindustan! Eating everything with the fingers, dipping each mouthful into the gravy, swallowing with loud sucking noises, and belching freely in order to compliment the host! No wonder the Khansamahs never wash their hands! . . .'

'Acha, son,' said the Nawab soothingly as he poured out whisky for the guests, 'You are not in Vilayat any more. And Hindustan is Hindustan! One thing the English have never learnt is how to eat: the sense of touch contributes a distinct sensation which they always miss by using forks and knives! . . .'

'Oh, Abdul, illegally begotten, oh, Abdul!' the Manager got up and shouted.

'They will hear that abuse in the Zenana,' said Captain Effendi chivalrously. 'For God's sake tell me what you want, I will fetch it for you!'

'I want to break the head of that swine Abdul!' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah. 'Not only is there no sugar, and the milk full of cream, but the tea is cold and he hasn't brought any hot water. And I have vowed never to take wine ever since I had a vision of Divine Grace! . . .'

'When did that happen, friend?' asked the Count mischievously.

'Aré, this boy nearly died in your absence abroad,' explained the Nawab with a sly twinkle in his eye. 'He had an accident while he was hunting: the gun in his hand suddenly burst and shot off his left leg. It shrivelled and he began to shrivel with it. Then, suddenly, he had a vision of the Almighty. Since then he has abjured wine and women, joined the Muslim League and become a fanatical prayer-sayer.'

'And began to bully the tenants on the estate,' added the Count.

Lalu had not met many landlords, but if Nasirabad was typical, they certainly had a sense of humour and were not the ogres they seemed to be from a distance.

'Well, what of it? I'm not making a secret of it!' said the Manager, proud and angry and ready for the fight. 'My business is to issue orders when the rents are not paid. And if the tenants become obstreperous and declare, under anyone's influence, that they won't work at the former price, then my

business is to evict them. Already the estate revenues have fallen. . . .'

'Yes, Kanwar Sahib,' said the Nawab, doling out large quotas of whisky in empty teacups to his guests and pronouncing his words as if he were seeking to control his tongue which was slippery with drink, 'The Taluqdars are getting poorer every day because the Sarkar does not reduce the fixed revenue.'

'Partly through their own fault,' said Jamal. 'Why don't we use gyro-tillers?'

'A machine can't till half an acre to advantage!' jeered comrade Verma.

'And what with their poverty. . . .'

'Poverty isn't a shortage of bare necessities,' said Jamal, 'but a question of responsibility. Those who make an intelligent use of direction, capital and manual power deserve the gains of their industry . . .'

'Nothing short of a re-division of land,' began the Count with a sudden expansion of his will.

'That is only in books, my dear sir,' said Hadayat Ullah.

'Aré, yar,' said the Nawab, making a wry face as he swallowed a mouthful of drink, and shaking a little as he rose from his chair. 'Whoever saw the like of these tenants? There is no getting on with them at all nowadays. Say one word to them and hell comes back at you with a hundred abuses! They are going mad. . . .' And he dismissed them with a weary shrug of his shoulders and, then, turning to his guests, said: 'Wah, what wretched hospitality on my part! Come, friends, drink up and forget the rest. Tell me about these European women? I hear the Girman girls are all padminis and the English all hastinis, who stink and never wash. . . .'

There was a wild laugh at this. Lalu was convinced now that the Nawab was a nice fellow, a harmless fool, completely in the hands of his Manager.

'They will come back to me, these tenants,' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, puffing out his nostrils so that his face tightened into an angry bitter frown. 'They will come back after eating dung! The rogues! They will soon have cultivated a taste for food. Sons of dogs! They will come bending low in entreaty

and demand the lands which they have neglected. And Rampal, let me warn you against that One-eyed Sukhua, who is causing all this trouble.'

'You will have to go to the root of the trouble,' suggested Jamal with the redoubtable commonsense he had acquired in England. 'You will have to teach them thrift because the accumulation of wealth has always been outside their philosophy of life. . . . Your holder of half an acre still grows wheat as if he held thirty acres and he will not grow vegetables!'

'My son,' said the Nawab, 'we in Asia were centuries ahead of Europe. Asia will live when Europe is forgotten. We know how to live. We are not hurrying to prosperity. We can lie back and look at the stars: and we desire love. As the poet says:

'Show thy face, for I desire the orchard and the rose-garden;
Ope thy lips, for I desire sugar in plenty.
O sun, show forth thy face from the veil of cloud,
For I desire that radiant glowing countenance.'

'And our ancestors classified forty different kinds of women from their smells!' mocked the Count.

'Asia has been for centuries in decay and doom,' said Professor Verma, solemnly crystallizing his own thoughts in the atmosphere which the leisurely dissipated air of the tea-party had vitiated.

'Yes, Nawab Sahib,' jeered the Count, assuming the tone of a brother landlord persuading one of his order to come forward: 'We in India ought to make the best of a bad job, we should retain our lightheartedness, but we should shrug our shoulders at our departed glory and accept all the modern amenities, electric light, motors, Paris fashions, champagne. . . .'

'Ah! champagne, that is talking the true talk! said the Nawab. 'Shall we have some . . . O bey, Abdul, come here. . . .'

'It is rather early for that,' rebuked Hadayat Ullah. 'I want some tea before I go to the office and that Abdul!—seed of a donkey! . . . Aré, O Abdul! the milk! the tea!—all is cold! . . . But, before I go, may I say to you, Rampal, on behalf of the Nawab Sahib, that we are starting a Landlords' Association and we would like you to join us.'

'Brother Rampal, our peasants used to be a peaceable lot,' said the Nawab gently, dolefully, almost in a singsong.

'There are bad influences about, Rampal,' said Hadayat Ullah vaguely, though pointedly enough to be insinuating. 'And I am making every tenant who stirs up trouble an example to others. What would you do with a rebellion?'

'Of course, I would help a rebellion,' said the Count casually.

'Oh, don't be a fool!' said Hadayat Ullah with a nervous laugh. 'Try and be serious. Come to dinner with me one day and let us talk about this Association.'

'Come and let us go for Shikar one day, son,' the Nawab suggested. 'Also the spring has come for amorous sports and all the courtesans of Lucknow are lying fallow. . . .'

'I am bent on other sport,' said the Count.

'Come, come, Kanwar Sahib, you don't want to be a scab,' said Jamal with a smile. 'Surely your brother and your friend Hadayat Ullah here.'

'Shall both be extremely mortified to find that the tenants they evict are escaping from their grasp and rallying under my banner,' said the Count. 'You will be lucky if there are any homesteads left hear if you go on treating them like that. For the mass of these tenants life has become horrible while we grandees keep court as if each of us were a Chengis Khan, except that the Sarkar who made us can clip our wings through the offices of any little deputy commissioner.'

'Well then Captain Effendi knows his job, if any of our men are seduced,' said Hadayat Ullah.

'Unfortunately Captain Effendi will no longer have the monopoly of violence,' said the Count, suppressing his voice almost to a whisper so as not to be threatening.

'We shall see who has got a monopoly of violence!' said Captain Effendi, firmly pursuing his mouth.

'I tell you there will be an awful row,' challenged Hadayat Ullah with a leer as he got up to go.

'Aré, stop quarrelling, sons,' said the Nawab, seeing the tentacles of courtesy snap in the young man's arguments. Now Lalu was almost sorry for the Nawab, for in spite of the

warmth of his hospitality the atmosphere seemed to have become poisonous.

'There is a famine on,' said the Count, 'and luxury based on the serfdom of others has never proved lasting.'

'Ah, but this is Bolshevism, son, an entirely destructive doctrine,' said the Nawab, shaking his head. 'Ah, there, we don't agree!'

'Therefore we will part company while thare is yet a certain amount of goodwill between us.' And the Count rose from his chair. 'Acha, Nawab Sahib, we are very grateful. . . .'

Everyone arose in the tensé moment, and there were nervous smiles, rough-edged eruptions from the smouldering antagonism which had flared up, the corrosive lava of natures which had been seeking to suppress their violence beneath the veneer of conventional courtesy.

As the Count and his friends emerged from Nasirabad, under cover of feudal hospitality and goodwill, they recovered their original ill will and the direct hatred which courtesy had kept in control, and they mocked and jeered at their hosts. And they immediately began to plan the revolution: Verma Sahib was to go to Allahabad to arrange for the publication of *Naya Hind*; Ram Din was to explore the possibilities of finance; while Lal Singh was to arrange a meeting of peasants who would gather on the banks of the Ganges on the impending festival of the eclipse of the sun.

IV

PREPARATIONS for the eclipse festival had gone on for days. Primitive straw booths had been constructed, where the pilgrims could discard their clothes in the safe custody of priests before going to wash the possible effects of the eclipse off their bodies in the holy water of the mother Ganges, and where they could afterwards have prayers said for the well-being of their families, for a good harvest and prosperity. Little stalls, full of crude sugar-plums, spread down the length

of the sand, interspersed, here and there, by a booth on which lay rotten bananas and brown-red tamarind, heaps of glass bangles, cheap coloured beads and Japanese toys, which were crowding out the clay effigies of Rama and Sita, the Lord Krishna and English Sahibs and Mems from the markets. And, for days, scattered bunches of pilgrims came, men and women with their broods of children, tanned by the burning sun, trudging for miles acorss the countryside, their coares sadries and loin cloths stinking with sweat, their shrivelled, black bodies covered thick with dust, sinking under the burden of the bundles of household goods on their backs,—lumps of humanity, monstrous and intense like the elements which they had come to appease, crude, uncouth and worn like the earth of which they were made, hard like rocks and yet weak with all the weaknesses of a downtrodden humanity, sustained by hope in their hearts and tenderness in their eyes.

As Lalu awoke on the morning of the eclipse, the scattered groups of pilgrims on the sands had swelled overnight into an amorphous mass of singing, praying, agitated and fervent humanity beyond the temple. After Europe there was an element of surprise to him in this religiosity, even though he had always known in his own village that the godliness of the peasants was no more than the belief in the other world of those who expected nothing from this. But he did not feel the violent impatience for them that he had felt years ago, even as the Count, who had written atheistic pamphlets and deliberately tried to antagonize the orthodox by eating beef in his youth, now felt more tolerant. Instead, he discoverd in himself a certain indifference to the antics which they were performing, as they offered water to the sun from their upraised palms. and as they submitted their foreheads to be daubed in chalk and saffron or red aniline dyes by priests, to the tune of tinkling coppers.

Strangely enough, as he rushed down with Ram Din, Gupta and Nandu Babu towards the river, he found that, at close range, the throng was not altogether transcendalist and nobly occupied with securing the soul and the body against the possible effects of the eclipse of the sun. Swarms of peasants,

turned beggars, lined the steps of the temple, as well as the tracks between the booths, begging the more fortunate among the pilgrims for food and money, with pitiful cries which sounded like a mixture of the shrillest longing for land, deep sorrow, dull resignation and a persistent will to live: 'Bawa, give a pice for we have been evicted! Bawa, give a pice for God's sake, for the sake of your children! Bawa, for the sake of Ram, help us to get a meal! Oh, brother! .. For the sake of . . .!' And, further, most of the pilgrims, having had their ceremonial dips in the Ganges, were busy feeding the inner self with handfuls of roasted gram and crude sugar, which they had brought from home or bought at the stalls. And, here and there, furious bargaining was going on over dumps of seed which the merchants from all parts of the countryside had set up overnight, over heaps of farm implements, lean bullocks and spindly cows who weakly wagged their tails to scatter the flies which gathered on their noses, their mouths, their eyes and their sores. . . .

'Dhum, dhum, dhum,' Sheikh, the dignified warlus-moustached, white-clothed estate musician, beat up a sudden and urgent one-two refrain on the drum at Lalu's instance. As the contagion of the heat, the prayers, the babble, the wild bargaining calls and the extravagant emotions of the crowd began to gather into the strain, the hundreds of startled pilgrims stopped whatever they were doing and stretched their eyes and their ears to this strange, strong 'dhum, dhum.'

' "Bolo Sri Ram Chander ki jai!" ' Ram Din suddenly called the cry of religion, and then continued: 'Come, brothers, come friends, come and see the new incarnation of God, the saints, who bring you a new message, a new hope. . . . Come.'

This kind of incitement made Lalu impatient. He hoped he would not have to raise his voice so dishonestly and so loudly. He did not want to excite people like that. But this call seemed to confirm the familiar feelings of the crowd, to stir the memory of an age-old cry in their blood, specially with the pressure of the deep rhythmic sound of the drum which came behind it. They rushed towards the focal point of the dais on which Ram Din was standing as if he were the God King Rama

himself, who had appeared and was talking to them. Now Lalu realized why an agitator had to speak at the top of his voice: he had to excite and be excited. Only he wondered whether he would be equal to the task himself, for he felt a shyness, and a hindrance in himself, the fear that he may be unworthy of his ambition to lead others.

' "Bolo Sri Krishna Maharaj ki jai!" ' Gupta shouted the tribute to another God, and then began to imitate the bray of a donkey with a deliberate mischief that ended in a splutter of laughter, so that the crowd stood back, hesitated and began to turn away.

Some voices in the crowd called aloud, looking at each other, half eager, half afraid, 'It is only a juggler's show! Tamasha!'

'Nandu, strike the brother-in-law number two!' Ram Din said as he swung round at Gupta, thinking the fool had spoiled the show. And, mounting the platform of the booth, he shouted: 'Come, brothers, come and form a circle.' And he urged Sheikh to drum hard with wild flourishes of his hand.

Now there was a stampede of the babbling, whispering, awe-struck crowd, a mad rush of curiosity and abandon, so that legs, hands, shoulders rubbed against each other, as they reached out to the platform, pulsing to the throb of the dhum, dhum, dhum.

Sheikh, sure of touch on the undertones of a sitar, as well as on the overtones of the tabla, imaginously improvised an imitation of the heart-beat on the dholki and then led up to a crescendo of shrillness till the crowd had almost become a compact mass. Then he dropped the handle suddenly and caught the crowd in a torment of interest.

It was a wonderful sight to Lalu as he stood almost facing the sun on the rosy morning from the midst of this gigantic crowd, put into relief by the white-blue swell of the Ganges, which seemed to issue from the bend of ochre-coloured hillocks and flash past the shining old white house of Rajgarh, from where his woman, the rare and detached flower, would be looking at him. But in his throbbing head was the emptiness of exhilaration, in his palpitating heart a fear of the consequences, and his tongue was tied though his breath welled up to say

something, to begin. But what was he to prove to them and how was he to convert them to forget all about the eclipse of the sun and look at their own misery.

'Come on, friend, cast off the fear and talk to the men, straight!' Ram Din called to him.

'He is a *bourgeois*, Sála!' sneered Gupta. 'He seems moon-struck!'

'Acha, brothers,' Lalu began with a smile at the truth of Gupta's remark. 'Spread around the arena and you will see such fun as you have never seen before. But do so without pushing or hurting anyone, for though all are equal in the grave, they are not good to look at when killed or mutilated!' He was talking in a conversational manner, man to man. There were whispers among the throng at his homely way of speech.

Lalu was afraid that they were losing interest in him. But he was bent on his purpose though rather confused in his mind.

'You shall soon have occasion to hear Kanwar Rampal Singh of Rajgarh,' he began abruptly in a fit of modesty. But, immediately after he had uttered these words, he became aware of his potential astuteness as a mob orator, for he had canalized the peasant's reverence for their age-old master into the campaign. 'First answer a few questions.' He paused dramatically and then raised his chin to them, nervous yet persistent.

'What are the things that hinder the life of a peasant?'

It was too sudden a blow: the crowd looked dumbfounded. What had all this to do with the eclipse festival. And this was no tamasha. They were expecting a juggler to arise suddenly and dance with his bear.

At this, Ram Din, the rough, got up and, swaying his long thin body, almost as if he were a willow cane who was going to lash them, said: 'Speak, does not the rice of the unfortunate cook into gruel? So what hinders a peasant's life?'

'Poverty,' shouted Lalu, 'Isn't it so, brothers?'

Some men in the crowd whispered.

'What else hinders a peasant's life?' Lalu asked, and, as before, the bewildered crowd remained silent.

'Aré, what makes a camel walk slowly?' asked Ram Din.

'A heavy load,' a man in the crowd answered.

'A heavy load on a camel is like a load of debt on a peasant!' shouted Lalu with a little more vehemence. And he added: 'The ryot must borrow to pay rent or starve.' He paused, but, knowing that it was touch and go whether audience scattered or remained intact, he let loose his words, trusting his instinct to guide him. He knew the effect of debt in his own bones. His father had died of it, and his whole family had been ruined by it, so his emotions welled up and he shrieked: 'If you are a cultivator you have to borrow to secure a crop, don't you? . . . If your holding is small and has to support more mouths than it can feed, you have to borrow again! If you want to avoid eviction on account of unpaid arrears of rent, you have to increase your borrowing a hundred fold, till debt becomes a mountain, the very Himalayas, whose shadow lengthens till your back is broken under the weight of this mountain! . . . And what else hinders the peasant's life?' No one spoke. So he himself answered, 'Rent.' Then he paused and said, 'Eviction.'

'"Bolo Comrade Lal Singhji ki jai!"' Ram Din shouted, as if Lalu had earned his applause.

The crowd responded indifferently.

Sheikh struck up the drum to whip up more noise to keep the men together.

'If you know the answers to all these questions, brothers,' Lalu wound up, 'then, to-day, the gates of a new life will become open to you. For, in a far land called Roos, too, the peasants once suffered as you do, and then they set up their own Raj. . . . And now the peasants and workers are ruling there, and all men live there like brothers. . . . So give a shout: "All men are brothers!"'

The peasants answered, even as he shrieked aloud, their empty hearts subdued by the pressure of his voice.

Lalu paused, relieved that he hadn't been a failure, that he had been able to say a little of what was in his heart and to assert his superiority, his right to leadership. Then he announced: 'Now, Kanwar Rampal Singh will speak to you.'

There was a silence during which the significance of this meeting began hazily to dawn upon the men. It was known all over the countryside that Kanwar Rampal Singh was the friend of the poor. They whispered to one another, their eyes and faces transfused with a sudden eagerness.

'Encouragement is a great thing, brothers!' Ram Din shouted after Sheikh had smothered the babble with a few more strokes of the drum. ' "Bolo Kanwar Rampal Singh ki jai!" '

And the whole torrid landscape, the earth and the sky rang with the multitude's cry.

At this Lalu got down from the booth and Ram Din, Gupta and Nandu lifted the Count to the platform.

The Count was somewhat pale and slow, as he had had a bout of asthma that day and some trouble with the extension of a bone in his nose which wanted cauterizing. His head was hunched into his shoulders, as usual, and he coughed a little as he re-adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. But the audience was still, with the respect which the mere association of his name with the landlords of Rajgarh evoked from the generations of tenants. And he seemed confident, almost arrogant, and gave the impression that his interest in himself far exceeded his anxiety for the poor. He began in an almost matter-of-fact in dialect:

'Brothers, you have come here to-day to cast off the taint of the eclipse of the sun from your bodies. Well, they say, that this sun is a friend of the Sahibs, of the Angrezi race, that it never sets on the dominions of the Angrezi Sarkar. But to-day, this sun is eclipsed, which, as the poet might say, means that the power of the Sarkar is beginning to decline . . .'

' "Bolo Sri Ram Chander ki jai!" ' called Ram Din. There was a burr-burr on the flanks of the crowd and a feeble echo of the call came back to the dais.

Suddenly, before the Count began, there was a chapper-chapper' of quick, knife-edged, 'charkatting' tongues.

Lalu was half apprehensive at the consequences of so bold an assertion as that about the Sarkar. For, even though he had turned his back on the Government, so fixed had been his belief in the Sarkar as something fixed, eternal, something which

could never be changed, far less eclipsed, that he wondered if some peseants in the throng were not frightened. The men were listening, intent, but as he lifted himself on his toes he saw, beyond the crowd, a clot of threatening heads and upraised arms. Then came a voice:

'Some of us are Muhammadans! And it is an insult to our religion to say Long live Ram Chanderji!'

'Keep quite!' Nandu shouted. And, ducking under the dais with the alacrity of the hunter, emerged out of the crowd and got to the spot where the disturbance had been.

'Listen, brothers, listen,' said Ram Din.

'Insult to the prophet!' the man who had objected shrieked, as he flourished his arms. 'To insult the Sarkar is to insult the prophet Yessuh Messih who has been recognized as a Prophet by our religion!'

'Chup, ré chup!' the peasants were turning back and shouting.

'They are insulting me!' the objector shouted.

'Now, you come with me, brother,' said Nandu, 'and we will settle that between those strong arms of yours and these biceps of mine.' And he dragged the man away, leaving the crowd slightly ruffled but intact.

'But, though the power of the Sarkar has declined,' continued Kanwar Rampal Singh, 'it has not yet been destroyed.... Comrade Lal Singh has asked you what hinders you from being able to live a better life. And you gave the answers. Perhaps out of respect for me nobody mentioned the landlords. . . .'

There were furtive looks as if the peasants were surprised to hear these words from the mouth of a landlord, followed by an inexplicable loud jeer.

'Comrades,' the Count continued with a deliberate irony: 'I am a nobleman and don't understand your life. . . . I am told that whether empires come or empires go, the peasant is a slow person who goes about with a bowed head under a merciless sky and will always continue to do so. . . . And some say that the peasants persist because there are so many of them, that the loss of a couple of lakhs through death makes no difference! . . .'

Because of the exaggerated seriousness of his tone there was laughter at this. Lalu felt that the Count was a master of the art of exciting the crowd, almost a juggler with words, and vain, very vain the way he cocked his head.

'But, I believe that the peasant lives because he has a soul that refuses to die,' added the Count. 'And in the struggle to keep alive he helps the race to keep alive.'

'Truly said! True!' some peasants sighed.

'I have also heard,' said the Count, 'that the ryot is always weeping over his misfortunes and is afraid. . . . I daresay the landlord's breath does not blow much sweetness on the ryot!'

There was more laughter at this.

'But I believe,' he said to rally them together, 'that if ever the clouds of oppression lift a little the ryot can smile as well as anyone; in fact he can laugh — even shout — '

'Give a shout,' called Ram Din. 'Show him you can tear your lungs: shout, "Kanwar Rampal Singh ki jai!"'

There was a loud and prolonged echo to this call, followed by ripples of laughter at the Count's clowning.

'My faith in human nature has received a severe blow,' Rampal Singh said. 'I have heard that if the ryot is evicted or beaten up by the landlord, or his hut burns down, or he falls ill, he sits patiently with never a word to say for himself, thinking it is the will of God! . . . And here, you peasants seem quite different from what I was told you were like. . . . You never mention the word God or care a fig for those priests!'

But he had spoken too soon. Before the last words were out of his mouth, a group of priests, followed by Sadhus, ascetics, beggars and devout peasants, came towards the gathering, running in short capers, gesticulating with raised hands, as if they had drunk too much hemp and gone mad.

'Atheists! Unbelievers! Eaters of the cowflesh and drinkers of urine wine! They have spoilt the holy festival! . . ,'

The crowd remained silent and compact, as if hypnotized.

Lalu rushed out to intercept the disturbers of peace with Nandu and Gupta close behind him. His own hindrances seemed to fade as he saw the obstructionists disrupting the meeting.

But the holy men scattered and edged past them as if they were avoiding some untouchables, brandishing their skull-bowls and trisulas, flinging their hands in the air and shouting, angry and hysterical: 'A holy festival! And these unbelievers are leading you to ruin! Whoremongers!'

'Truly they have no religion! Neither Hindus nor Mussalmans!' the man who had interrupted earlier shouted.

Ram Din tore across the crowd to deal with this provocateur, parting the men like a swimmer cresting the waves, shouting the while: 'Catch the swine! He is an agent of the police.'

The provocateur dealt a resounding blow to a peasant who tried to hold him and ran, pressing the crowd on every side, hitting and shouting abuse as he tried to extricate himself. A woman whom he had trampled under foot shrieked.

'Hit the brother-in-law!' Ram Din shouted.

But his call was drowned in the welter of noises that sprang from the scuffle, which had started where the holy men were dragging the peasants and being dragged in turn by Lalu, Nandu and Gupta.

'Go back, go back!' the Count was shouting to the holy men furiously from the dais.

The peasants mistook this for a direction for them to depart and they turned in a painic, uttering curious, gurgling noises from their throats, their twisted, uncouth limbs falling, stumbling, rushing like animals trapped in a penfold, whom their master had ordered to scatter, growling at each other, pushing and shoving with their shoulders, their elbows and their hands. . . .

'Hooligans! Drunkards! Scoundrels!' the cries arose where the holy men, now red-eyed and demoniac with fury, swung sticks and chains and wooden bowls as they attacked wave after wave of peasants who were surging behind Nandu out of sheer curiosity to see what was happening.

'Catch them! The parasites!' Lalu shouted to the peasants, even as he struggled to disarm one of the beggars and dragged a priest by the tuft-knot. The blood surged in his veins, and his old hatred of religion rose to the surface. His face was red-hot and grim, his eyes bloodshot. Never quite ready for

emergencies, now, for once the issue seemed to him clear and certain. And he would have lifted his hand.

But the babbling, scampering crowd only stared with black eyes, as they ran or stood, fluttering yet spellbound, as though held in fear of the terrible, elemental waves of hatred that filled the void before their eyes.

'Beat the brothers-in-law! Beat them!' Gupta, the clown, shrilled to the peasants as he collected the staves which Lalu was snatching from the holy men. And, then, as he saw the peasants drifting, he began to 'ba ba' like frightened sheep to shame the men.

But the crowd was fast dispersing before him and gathering into a ponderous cloud on one side, while three clots of men joined in, one to separate Nandu who was inflicting clap-clap slaps on the face of the agent provocateur, the other behind Ram Din, who stood on the dais by the Count striking a broken bamboo on the dais to silence everyone, a third near the spot where Lalu glared at the holy men.

For a moment the chaos settled itself into a pitched battle. And the weird, rasping shrill cries of the antagonists filled the air, above the swish of the Ganges and the slow, insidious sound of the hushed voices on the vast sands by the temple, now electric with the heat of the burning sun. And it seemed as if some evil, monstrous, cruel, revengeful God were going to wreak a long vengeance on the Count and his followers, some sacrifice of broken heads and flowing blood. But a wave of stall keepers, pilgrims and priests came shouting: 'Police! Police!'

As suddenly as the provocateur and the holy men had joined issue, they fell away.

Swaggering with lifted chests, two village policemen came stalking up to the scene, veritable gods of all gods from the way they stilled the riotous universe.

'Don't heed them,' the Count shouted to his companions. 'Let them come to me and I shall see what they have to say.'

But the policemen only scattered the crowd with their staves and, gathering the provocateur and the holy men, returned

towards the temple, leaving the Count and his companions dumbfounded.

Apparently the police had had instructions only to disturb and break up the meeting.

They came back tired and spent after the furious activity of the morning and sat down to a post-mortem on the ignominious end of their attempt to work up Revolution.

'The police were behind the mischief!' said Gupta.

'These Brahmins are angry that we celebrated the marriage of Comrade Lal Singh in the Arya Samaj,' said Misra, affecting a hurt meek air as if he had suffered a personal disaster. 'The bastards will have to be turned out of the estate!'

'I did not see the Samajists retaliating against the Sanatanists at the meeting: it was left to us to combat them,' said the Count, referring to Misra's absence from the meeting.

'We should report the incident to Kanwar Birpal Singh,' said Nandu. 'He will deal with them and with the police.'

'The police will deal with you first,' said the Count with blunt cynicism as he lay down on his bed.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Ganga, his black pigmy servant, came in and announced:

'Maharaj, Thanedar Brij Bhushan Singh Sahib wants to see you.'

'What does he want?' the Count asked.

'Huzoor, I don't know,' Ganga said stupidly.

'Why didn't you ask him, you fool!' the Count shouted.

He had cultivated a strong belief in efficiency during his stay abroad, but, unable to cure himself of all his own feudalisms, he insisted on drilling the habits and manners of a good valet into the small, barefooted, bow-legged, thick-necked dwarf, who was addicted to wearing a loose loin cloth and handspun tunic. As Ganga resisted the encroachments of modernity on his person, he had to pay the penalty of the backward in being bullied whenever the Count happened to be bad-tempered, whether from the lack of personal attention or on account of any other upset. Civilization had advanced in India, but there were still galley slaves in the kitchen.

Ganga stood silent with his hands joined before him.

'All right, show him in!' the Count said.

The servant went out and ushered the visitor in.

The Sub-Inspector was a tall Rajput, dressed in a khaki tunic, a tight pair of Jodhpur breeches and snub-nosed Indian shoes, all rather loose in the style of the country police. He looked awkward, partly because of his height and partly because he felt sheepish in the presence of the prince, as if the very echo of the Count's voice had put the fear of God into him. He joined hands to the Count and stood blinking at the door for a while.

'Come, Thanedar Sahib, come and grace us with your presence,' the Count said with mock humility.

'Forgive me, Maharaj,' the Sub-Inspector ventured.

'Come, come and sit down.' The Count indicated a chair.

Flustered at this cordiality, the Thanedar came forward hesitantly, and then swooped down on the chair, bewildered and embarrassed, as if he were unable to contain the trunk of his long body into the small space of an office chair. And, for a moment, there was a sullen silence in the room, which took depth from the flushed frown on the Count's face.

'Forgive me, Maharaj,' the Thanedar began again. 'I am only doing my duty.'

'Of course, you are only doing your duty!' said the Count ironically.

The Sub-Inspector gingerly toyed with his moustache, as if to muster strength to stand up to Kanwar Rampal Singh a little more in the traditions of the city police. But he couldn't lift his head to face the prince, so weighed down was he with the respect he owed to the landlord's family as a citizen of Rajgarh, and had in fact been put into his present position at the recommendation of the Count's elder brother, the late Raja of Rajgarh.

'Maharaj,' he began tentatively, 'is there a man called Lal Singh here?. . . He is an ex-sepoy who has abducted the daughter of a landlord in the Punjab and taken refuge in these parts. The Punjab police have a warrant for his arrest. . . .'

'It is your business to find out,' the Count said sternly. 'You don't give me half your salary, do you, that I should help you in your nefarious activities?'

Lalu's face was flushed and there was an ache of apprehension at the back of his head as he sat in a chair almost facing the Sub-Inspector. So this woman, the landlord's daughter, was going to be the ruin of him again. Of course, he knew, that the policeman knew, that he, Lalu, was there, specially as the crowd had shouted his name. But there was only one chance of escape and that lay in the extent to which the Sub-Inspector could be cowed by Kanwar Rampal Singh. Still he might carry out his duties irrespective of all the fear which dwarfed him in the Count's presence.

'Strange that Satan should prove sin!' said Gupta, the clown. 'Why, the Thanedar Sahib himself kept the widow of the policeman Datia under his protection for two years before her people came from Allahabad to fetch her!'

'A widow is fair game in our parts where so many of them only turn whores,' said the Count ironically. 'And the Thanedar Sahib made an honest woman of Datia's widow, because I am told that Datia was driven to death by her.'

'Kanwar Sahib, you can jeer at such humble folk as myself.' The Sub-Inspector was supressing the resentment of the proud Rajput in him.

'Not at all,' returned the Count. 'I myself haven't had a woman so long that I sympathize with those who take the law into their own hands and run away with any female they can get hold of. Look, the law is preventing my woman in Vilayat from coming here, so I am all for people taking their pleasures where they find them.'

They were all fairly pagan in the villages of Oudh. For the age-old Dravidian tradition had never been properly conditioned by the rigorous puritanism of the later ethics. But they were sufficiently overawed by the sanctions of religion not to speak openly of sex, even if they regarded every woman in a lentil field as an obvious prize. And they were all shocked at the Count's outspokenness about desire.

'Aji, Kanwar Sahib, you can't say that there is any objection

to her coming from our point of view,' said Misra. 'We shall be happy to have the honour of celebrating your marriage in the Samaj.'

'Then the priests at the Temple who are Santanists will come and threaten to kill her,' put in Ram Din, 'considering what the bastards did to-day! And the police will merely round them off and offer them the shadow of their protection.'

'We can tackle them if they challenge us,' said Misra.

'Not without the help of the police!' said Gupta ambiguously.

'Don't quarrel or start a riot here,' said the Count. 'If you accuse each other of being agents-provocateurs, then the Thanedar Sahib will feel more insulted than ever, and he will be forced to bring a charge against you though he has none at present, and then you will all be expecting me to bail you out.'

'So this man Lal Singh is not here?' Brij Bhushan Singh said coming to the point, even as he watched Lal Singh surreptitiously.

'What is he like?' the Count asked.

'I have got a photograph of him, though that was taken a long time ago!' the Sub-Inspector said, producing a picture of Lalu with a turban and beard of his pre-war incarnation of the Church Mission School days.

'Ah, what an owl!' the Count laughed, looking at it in an impersonal, indifferent manner.

'A seedy jackal!' said Gupta noticing that Lalu seemed to be drowning in sweat.

'A goat from that beard!' said Ram Din with a smile.

'A lion,' said Lalu brightening. 'Look at that mane round his face!'

'You are not looking for our Professor Verma by any chance, are you?' the Count asked the Sub-Inspector.

'No, we know all about Verma Sahib,' said the man knowingly. 'He was in Germany too, but we want Lal Singh, who was war prisoner in Germany and demobilized from the 69th Rifles at Lahore. . . . He was friendly with some terrorists, who have been arrested in a village called Nandpur, for complicity in a plot to murder well-known citizens. His uncle, who has also been arrested, gave information which . . .'

'If the man who resembles this photograph comes here, we shall restore him to you,' said the Count.

'Maharaj, please don't make a fool of me,' said the Sub-Inspector with the earnestness of the abject victim who perceives that the whole world is laughing at him. 'I am your subject, but I am also the servant of the Sarkar. . . .'

'The plain truth is, Thanedar Sahib,' said the Count, 'that "when a man and woman agree the Judge cannot do a thing" is as true a proverb in law as it is in life. Besides, Lal Singh was married off a few days ago and the marriage is registered with the authorities. And you have no other specific charges against him. So if Captain Effendi has sent you prowling round here, please go and tell him that he will have to find a better excuse to arrest my men. And, as for your tactics of putting up the priests to the tricks they played with us this morning,—well, I know how to deal with you all! Only come out into the open and don't go intriguing behind our backs, and don't come here playing the meek cat who went on a pilgrimage after swallowing seven rats. So long as the people *take care to be on the side of the law you have no right to* come arresting them. Sardar Lal Singh is there before you, but I dare you or Captain Effendi to touch him. And now get out.'

The Count had spoken bluntly but without blustering, as if he were merely asserting his divine right to pronounce judgment, as if he didn't need to prove himself, though his voice rose with the last words and he was red hot with rage as he finished up and began to walk up and down the room, obviously to control his passion.

'Maharaj! . . . I was only obeying orders,' the Sub-Inspector stammered.

'Maharaj! Maharaj! I tell you Captain Effendi knew that he had no right to disperse a peaceful procession! So he asked you to get hooligans to start a religious riot! . . . There are people in the palace whose fanaticism might serve you as a tool. But, after Amritsar, after Gandhi's campaign, we shall not be daunted by you people. All the same, we shall see to it that the landlords do not oppress the kisans any more! . . .'

'Maharaj, your brother got me my position,' said the Sub-Inspector with joined hands. . . .' 'Please forgive me. . . .'

'Don't come crawling to me,' shouted the Count to see him grovelling and realizing with horror that his suspicions about the responsibility of the police for the disturbances at the meeting were really true. 'Get out or I shall have you thrown out of here! . . . You have the audacity to provoke a riot and then you come begging forgiveness. I would not stand in the way of your performing your duties, but if your duty is to start riots I shall have you and your friend Effendi dealt with! . . .'

The Sub-Inspector stood with his head bent, then he tried to fall at the Count's feet.

'Get out,' the Count roared.

The policeman was weeping as he withdrew.

This spell of regal rage bound the company in a knot of utter stillness for a few seconds. Then the Count turned menacingly to Misra:

'Listen, you, too, are playing a dangerous game, taking the talk of one company to another. If you go on with your mischief . . .'

'But, Maharaj, if I had wanted to make mischief I shouldn't have encouraged Sardar Lal Singh to legalize his abduction,' said Misra, shrinking and pale. 'What would have happened if he hadn't married?'

Lalu was too stunned by the news of the arrest of Gughi and Co, and his uncle Harnam Singh, to talk. In him the Sub-Inspector's brief hints about the fate of his friends in Nandpur, and the whole affair of the morning, only compelled doubt and fear about his present activities.

'Come, Sahib, we will have a little flush,' Gupta said, shuffling a pack of cards. 'I want to win some money off you for the dowry of my daughter.'

'Brother-in-law!—I shall call that Sub-Inspector and hand you over for gambling!' laughed the Count.

But he was game at any time for a little flush. For it was one of those habits which had infected the comrades worse than the bug of Revolution, so that, sitting, standing, waiting for a carriage, meeting in the bazaar, or on the sands where

they went to relieve nature, they produced a pack of cards and began to deal a round of flush.

The shock of the Sub-Inspector's visit with the news from the Punjab, following close upon his disillusionment in his first attempt to help with the Revolution, had unsettled Lalu.

As he left the Count's room to go and tell Maya what had happened, he felt tired and empty, as if he were sinking with a faint hunger. But, strangely, the exhaustion of his body left his mind clear and pellucid. Unlike the days of his youth at Nandpur when he had gone about the fields in an agony of self-violence, unlike the days in France when his soul and body had been the Sarkar's for fifteen rupees a month, unlike the long days of his life as a prisoner in Germany, unlike the days after his return to Nandpur when he was learning to cope with adversity, he had felt a curious strengthening of his will when he first came here, the kind of power which had raised his voice at the meeting when he had dreaded that he would hardly be able to open his mouth, a new strength which the sight of hundreds of peasants, the sound of their voices seemed to put into him,—an emotional and a nervous power which seemed to give him an inner largeness, a confidence in his own capacity to control his destiny and to help others to do the same. But then he realized that the peasants had scattered at the faintest gesture of disapproval from the priests; and that he himself had only been saved by the Count's bullying of the Sub-Inspector. And he felt that, somehow, he was fated, imprisoned by outside forces and incapable of breaking down the chain of circumstances. . . .

'Maya,' he called from the stairs leading to the terrace overlooking the swollen Ganges, where she was in the habit of sitting down to get the full benefit of the cool air in the increasing heat of the summer.

There was no answer.

He rushed up to the porch. There was no sign of her. Nor was she in the room they occupied.

'Maya,' he called, racing up to the top storey.

But there was no response. He was in a panic. He had

left her alone so much in this wing of the house, deserted except for Bhogat Mai, the old, toothless, shrivelled up ragged witch-woman servant of the Queen-mother, who lived in a small room by the gates under the tamarind tree, and the place was said to be haunted by the ghosts of all the dead who were burnt on the black stone on the foundations of which the first robber chief of Rajgarh had built this house. Not that he believed in evil spirits, but all the elements, the leonine river swirling past the bend, the miles of sandy deserted beds from which the Ganges had changed its course, glistening like a vast horror in the torrid glare, the dense vegetation of distant forests, the grotesque idols in the temple nearby, and all the dead tyrants of the past, who had fought each other for the possession of this land, and the wills of their present successors who held sway, combined to produce an uncanny air of doom over this ancient land, to infuse terror into the soul. . . .

As he hurtled down, breathlessly, to ask the witch-woman if she had seen his wife, he suddenly recalled that the Queen-mother, the old mother of the two Kanwars who lived in the right wing of the house, had asked them to the midday meal. Maya had probably preceded him there. He felt relieved and walked easily towards the spot where Bhogat Mai usually crouched, to ask her to inquire if it was convenient for him to go up.

Bhogat Mai was collecting fuel sticks under the tamrind tree and looked at him with the fathomless horror of her uncannily bright eyes, as she arranged her straggling hair. The wife of a priest, who had married her because she had inherited some land and money from her father, she had been deserted by her husband years ago when he went off with a young girl in the village of Nanakpur. Her relations had refused to help her and she had had to roam the streets as a beggar. The shock of her husband's betrayal had turned her head, so that she went about talking aloud to herself, declaring that she was in communication with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. And she enjoyed the status of the village oracle. The estate paid her a nominal sum for keeping watch on the spirits of the old palace, while the Queen-mother, reputed to be equally eccentric,

employed her as a maid of all work, while the youth of Rajgarh used her as a procuress.

At first she refused to listen to Lalu and went on communing with herself as was her wont. Then she suddenly turned to him and began to speak, showing her toothless dribbling mouth:

'So my son has lost his wife! Oh, my poor son! You are the friend of Rampal! He has lost his wife too. . . . And I have lost my husband. . . . But the Raj Mata, oh, the Raj Mata is angry with us all! . . .'

And shaking, trembling, rolling her eyes, she sped towards the Queen-mother's apartments, a ridiculous old woman, ugly and pathetically slow, and yet lovable for the willing slave she was to orders, a remnant of the old world, who would fulfil her 'duty' even in her madness, even though a husband may have wronged her, even though the world may have turned her out into the streets, even though the Queen-mother may send her on eccentric errands a hundred times a day.

As Lalu waited for her to return, he felt impatient at the subtle and intricate codes of these big feudal houses. The Queen-mother was an old widow of seventy and yet she had never unveiled herself to a stranger. One of her sons had roamed round the world and had become inured to seeing self-possessed European women walk about, shaming the daylight; he was, indeed, hoping to marry one of them, and yet he took the seclusion of his mother, and the partial seclusion of his brother's wife, for granted. Generations of landlordism and superiority had conquered the continent of India, and it would take some time before the revolutionaries could reconquer it for a new way of life. . . . But Lalu felt impatient for the hour when he could emancipate Maya.

He waited for a long time for Bhogat Mai to return, but then, at last, it seemed that purdah, had insured itself against violation by the gaze of the male stranger, and the maid called him.

He went up by the circular stairs in a tower, then across a high walled courtyard into a large verandah, overlooking the river and almost completely occupied by a scrupulously clean

kitchen, plastered with fresh anti-septic cow dung, at the foot of which sat Maya and Prem Vati, the wife of Kanwar Birpal Singh, the Manager of Rajgarh.

Both of them modestly drew their head aprons over their foreheads as he approached, while Bhogat Mai gave him a mat to sit on. He did not know where the Queen-mother was, but suddenly, from behind the ochre-coloured curtain of a room, came a shrill, strong aggressive voice.

'Why do you torture this innocent girl so? Why did you bring her to Rajgarh if you couldn't look after her, hein? Why do you leave her alone for whole days when you go making trouble on our estate?. . .'

Lalu was completely taken aback by this blunt challenge. It seemed to him that this was an inauspicious day for him.

'I . . .' he began to mumble as he wiped the sweat from his face.

'I, what? Rape-daughter! Isn't it true that you have been inciting the peasants, who came to bathe in the river, to revolt? I saw you. So don't lie to me! . . .'. The torrent of her words came like the leonine, imperious sweep of the old mother Ganges itself.

'Raj Mata,' Lal Singh ventured, pale and flustered. 'Kanwar Sahib . . .'

'Kanwar Sahib! Kanwar Sahib! I shall deal with that boy!' the Queen-mother burst out in a shrill though rather warm and exultant manner. 'He has neither the fear of God nor of man in him, so headstrong is he! The poor priests have come to me to-day with complaints that the pilgrims did not observe the sacred ceremony of the sun-eclipse as befits us Hindus. . . . And that friend of yours is going to marry a Mem while his first wife is languishing in Lucknow. . . . If this white woman be such a spinner, why doesn't she weave a web in her own country? . . . Lecher!'

'If you don't believe in God, yourself,' Maya taunted in support of the Queen-mother, 'at least let others say their prayers and earn merit!'

'They are all the same,' added Prem Vati. 'The father of my son has been shooting pigeons on this festive day. . . .

And Rampal proposes to marry this white woman. If he wants to marry a second wife at all, why can't he accept a bride from Jaipur? I could bring him one from the girls of my own brotherhood.'

Against this concerted attack, Lalu was speechless. It seemed to him that anyone in a superior position could prove the light in him to be an unrelieved darkness. And to think that the priests had the backing of the police on the one side and of the palace on the other! How could he demolish their prejudices without violating the customary respect which he owed to these exalted slaves, who had been so long made to wear the noserings that they now regarded them as the most glorious of their ornaments.

'The priests were instigated by the police, Raj Mataji,' he said.

'Of course, the police were behind them!' said the Raj Mata. 'The sarkar respects our religion and doesn't let it be spoiled by rascals like you. . . .'

'But, Raj Mata, the son-in-law of the Nawab of Nasirabad, Captain Effendi, who is superintendent of police, sent his agents to provoke the priests,' Lalu said.

'Aré, may he die! Really? Truly?' the Queen-mother shrieked. And, suddenly, all the hatred of her family for the landlords of Nasirabad possessed her, and she softened to Lalu. 'Illegally begotten thieves, these Muhammadan Nawabs! They tried to poison my husband! So they are again at us. But let them know that if they hurt one hair of my sons, or the estate, they will have to dig a thousand graves for their own slain! . . .'

And now she pushed forward a tray full of betel leaves from behind the curtain.

Embarrassed at this kindness, Lalu hung his head down and refrained from touching the polished, intricately-patterned silver tray.

'Take it, take it! Rape-daughter! Your food is not quite ready!' came the Queen-mother's voice, half-querulous, half-humorous and full of an overpowering sense of hospitality.

He recalled the vision of his own mother dispencing food to the guests in the haveli. There was something facinating about

these old tigerish Indian women, however reactionary they were, strong in hate and love, narrow, and stubborn in their addiction to custom, but solid and brave the way they withstood the wills of their overpowering men and in their compensating resurrection from their slavery of a subtle matriarchy which subdued even tyrants. He took the offering gingerly.

'Tell me, now, do you know the moman my Rampal Singh is going to call here?' she asked naïvely. 'I hear they eat their men out of hearth and home and all they think of is money! . . .'

'There are mothers, sisters, wives in Vilayat just as in our country,' he said. 'The rich women, of course, are vain, because they have not much to do, and spend endless time on their toilet — almost semi-prostitutes; but the working women look after their homes, their children and even supplement the incomes of their husband with a little labour. . . . They are all freer than our women and, apart from duty, value happiness and choose their own mates, irrespective of the wishes of their parents. In that the poorest maid servant is more forward than our most aristocratic woman.'

'Raj Mata, he cannot forget the bitterness he has against my parents for ill-treating him before he went to the war,' Maya protested with glittering eyes, as she thought that he was deliberately exalting European women in order, by implication, to show her up as shallow and ignorant. And she drew her headcloth over her face to hide her indignation.

'The father of my wife sent a warrant for my arrest this morning through the Sub-Inspector who got the priests to break up our procession,' Lalu said with an amused smile which barely disguised his intense resentment against his wife.

'Ah, the illegally begotten!' the Queen-mother burst out again with a wild passion. 'My poor son! They are harassing you! . . . Ah, you wait. I shall have him fetched to my presence. Where is he? I shall give this son of a Thanedar and the Sarkar a bit of my mind! Why, you are both my children now that you have come to live here! And no one dare molest you. Why, where are those two good-for-nothing boys of mine? Didn't they protect you? Just you wait, my son, I shall instruct them in

the best way to deal with the Sarkar! . . . My poor boy, and I hear your mother died weeping for you, too.'

Lalu felt a strange tremor of affection for the old woman, even as he laughed at her whimsical, elfish manner. She was blind and stubborn and fearless yet tender. If only she and her like would come out, he felt, if only she could come and talk to the peasants, though they would love and fear her more than the truth.

Professor Verma returned from Allahabad after having arranged the editorial details of *Naya Hind*. And, what was more remarkable, he brought with him Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari, B.A., LL.B., a well-known lawyer and politician, Secretary of the Allahabad District Branch of the Indian National Congress, to interest him in peasant agitation.

The coming of Srijut Tiwari was an important event in the history of the Oudh peasant movement. For, apart from the secret contacts of the Count, Professor Verma, and the other agitators with the communists and with members of the Indian National Congress, there had, hitherto, been no connection between the local peasant struggles and the national movement in the towns, which had attained great heights in the Congress campaign against the repressive measures of the Rowlatt Act in 1919 and after.

The peasants in the villages had heard of Mahatma Gandhi and of the strange new movement of non-co-operation he had started. Some of them had, indeed, taken part in it, but it was nevertheless a movement of the cities in which the shopkeepers predominated. Since the politicians seldom paid any attention to the peasants, the visit of Tiwariji was an exciting spectacle, even though he was a rather unimpressive, short, fat, coarse-featured figure in smudgy white homespuns, with well-oiled hair, parted in the English style, with thick lips on which dribbled the copious saliva of the several betel leaves he chewed all at once as he talked.

And, of course, with the coming of this celebrity there was talk in Rajgarh, any amount of it.

Now there are two major styles of conversation current in

India. One is called the *Kana-phusi*, which is the subdued, secretive style, 'I shall whisper into your ears,—strictly between you and me, remember!' And there is the open, long-winded, hair-splitting metaphysical discussion, the kind of talk which is the national sport of India.

As Lal Singh came up towards the Count's room, he saw Kanwar Rampal Singh standing under the shadow of the left wing of the palace engaged in *Kana-phusi* with a sleek young man. The stranger had a distinguished upper-class face, with a high brow, a fine aquiline nose, a tremulous under-lip, flawed by hard jaws, and deep sunken eyes behind a pair of delicate pince-nez.

With an ingrained respect for the secrecy of the *Kana-phusi* style of talk, Lalu would have edged past the two confederates, but the Count's eyes met his, when the nobleman least wanted to catch anyone's eye, for he seemed pale and flustered.

'Come and meet Comrade Sarshar!' he called.

Lalu went up and shook hands with Comrade Sarshar confidently, imagining him to be another of the Count's hangers-on who had been absent from Rajgarh before but who had now returned to take his place in the fold. And he waited for Kanwar Rampal Singh to describe this new Comrade with a brief satirical sketch of the kind with which he had introduced other members of his entourage. But, strangely, the Count remained silent and only stared at Lalu even as he perspired profusely as if in confusion.

Comrade Sarshar, too, fixed him with a discreet look and remained silent.

Lalu realized that he was in the way, so he made the excuse that he was going to see Professor Verma about some details of *Naya Hind*.

Curiously, however, the Count asked him to wait, saying: 'I am coming in with you. Sarshar Sahib is going.'

'Acha, then,' Comrade Sarshar said in a raised whisper as if he was delivering a parting shot:

'You must understand that though our ultimate aim is Revolution, we can't bring it about by saying the word Revolution a thousand times a day on the rosary of our hearts. You must

understand the material you are dealing with from day to day. . . . With that peculiar impulse to be impressive, which comes over some of us when we get on to the soap-box or platform, the bourgeois folk tend to use big, sonorous pompous words in order to show off. You see, the rhetorical styles of Burke, Sheridan, of Mill, of Gladstone and Asquith and others, have become the chronic inheritance of all our politically minded Indians. You have seen our Congress leaders, for instance, with their sedulous imitations of the best Parliamentary methods! . . . Wah, what to say? The only other reading matter that has come your way consists of long, windy Government proclamations! No wonder that people like you almost unconsciously tend to borrow a certain amount of windiness in talking to the peasants. But phrases like justice and liberty, which may mean something to the middle class in England, mean nothing real to the peasants, except that hypnotic power of exalted utterance impresses them with the lordliness of the lord and with their own ignorance! Such intellectual talk only befuddles the kisans and leads to a glorification of words. . . .'

'All right, all right,' said the Count impatient at Comrade Sarshar's criticism.

'I am not saying that a single person or a group cannot perform miracles of revolutionary organization, but we must be on our guard against spreading delusion and error among the simple straightforward peasant folk by merely shouting slogans —for these slogans may begin to signify more the limitlessness of Kanwar Rampal Singh's ambitions rather than the interests of the poor. . . .'

'My ambition, like yours, is Revolution,' protested Kanwar Rampal Singh, flushed hot and red, and quite humourless in the face of this personal attack.

Lalu felt embarrassed to be present at the scene of his patron's humiliation and wished he had gone his way and left them to their *Kana-phusi*.

'I do not doubt the integrity of your ideals, Kanwar Sahib,' said Comrade Sarshar. 'But it is a question of your methods. Anti-Government, anti-landlord, anti-moneylender, anti-religion, anti-Congress, anti-working class, anti-everything,—I

know that the circle of Kanwar Rampal Singh is out for a little fun! But the situation is serious, Comrade! And unless you can train yourselves and the most promising workers as professional revolutionaries, as members of an Indian-wide organization, which can provide continuity to the movement, in case of depletion through police arrests, unless you can meet the awakening kisans with passionate preaching as well as the soundest political education—but what am I talking about? Why unless? You simply must do this! You must become aware of your responsibilities, and rise to the full heights of your collective strength!'

The hard intensity which Sarshar put into this knife-edged exhortation had brought the froth of a copious spittle to the corners of his mouth, reddened his eyes, stretched the cords of his neck and shaken his lithe form, till he had seemed bound up in a harsh world from the centre of which he was looking out almost as if he deliberately wanted to hurt and wound.

The Count looked as if he hated the insultingness of Comrade Sarshar's preaching even as he stood pale and polite like a naughty boy before a schoolmaster.

Lalu could not understand what Sarshar meant because he had not heard the whole of the *Kana-phusi* from which this harangue had ensued. He let the lecture simmer through him.

'That loud Tiwari must be waiting for you inside,' said Sarshar. 'And I must be on my way to Lucknow.' And he took the Count by the sleeve for a moment and withdrew him to renew the *Kana-phusi*.

Lal Singh took the hint and proceeded towards the diwan. Before he had reached the verandah the engine of the Count's Ford car began to pound heavily as Ram Din shouted to some village lads who crowded round to clear away and helped Comrade Sarshar into the car.

'Who is this Comrade Sarshar?' Lalu asked the Count sympathetically as Kanwar Rampal Singh came up after saying farewell to his guest.

'Oh, he is a Communist—the organizer of the party for Northern India,' the Count whispered as if to indicate that

he did not want to talk of Sarshar in the presence of the other stranger, Tiwari.

'It is a dangerous game, Kanwar Sahib, which you are playing,' Srijut Tiwari began as they entered the room. 'That Sarshar is a rouge of the first order.'

Lalu knew that now he was walking into the middle of an open debate.

'Not dangerous enough for my liking,' answered the Count, going towards his bedstead. 'I am impatient for any hazard . .' And rather than expose Sarshar or his business, he began obliquely to explain what the communist had said. 'As a mattér of fact, he wants us to go slow, Tiwariji. He doesn't approve of us. . . . I know, however, that the first two great Russian Revolutions failed. And, within these, a whole series of minor attempts collapsed, and even the third and final one barely succeeded. But the Bolsheviks learned the lessons of their failures and did not sit down to bemoan their lot because they met a few agents-provocateurs face to face. . . .'

Apparently the company had been discussing the lessons of past struggles and the ways and means of future action, and Sarshar had taken the Count out for some *Kana-phusi* before his departure.

'Except, as Comrade Sarshar would say, that Lenin has said somewhere,' began Professor Verma with an ironic smile, 'that there must be a crisis before there can be a revolution.'

'Wait a minute,' said Srijut Ladhi Prashad Tiwari, disguising a baffled incomprehension in a loud and blustering manner. 'I meet the peasants in courts every day; they are a difficult people. They have grievances against the landlords, but they are grasping with each other. Almost all the cases I have handled for some time have been about quarrels between tenants who have a little land, which they plough patiently, and farm labourers, who are jealous of the tenants, even though they have themselves lost their property through sheer negligence and sloth. . . . I have no faith in the morals of this mob of lazy farm labourers who really want to evade work. . . . Look at the hundreds of them who sit on the roads of Allahabad,

preferring to beg rather than to do an honest day's work,—pests who make one's life difficult! . . .'

'That may be so, Tiwariji,' said Professor Verma without lifting his head or raising his dry, little voice, 'but the minor irritations and conflicting interests of tenants and farm labourers are not so acute as the contradiction between the absentee landlords and the landless peasants. . . . You know that forty per cent of the tenant farmers and even small zamindars are so burdened with debt—'

Srijut Tiwari had been shuffling on the Count's bed, as if he were sitting on a bed of thorns, while Verma spoke, his round owl's face transfused with impatience.

'It may be true,' he interrupted with a burning crazed energy, 'that it is the object of the Bolsheviks to put some respect for those who labour into the heads of the people, but Russia is different from us. . . . I believe in the dignity of labour which is prevalent in the west, but nothing is to be gained by bloodshed. As Gandhiji says, "Our aim is freedom and our method is non-violence!"'

For a pacifist, Lalu thought, this dignitary seemed extraordinarily belligerent as he ended swaggering and resonant, and sweating all over.

'But,' said Verma meekly, 'though Russia was a sovereign state and we are a colonial people, and though our problem is the problem of nationhood, still surely the struggle of the peasants can go on side by side with the struggle for freedom: the one is not possible without the other. . . .'

'Our problem,' the Count put in to settle the controversy between the obscurantist lawyer politician and the bookish Verma, rather solemn since Sarshar's lecture, and as if he were thinking aloud, 'is to recognize the revolution which has already taken place and to complete it. You all know that throughout Hindustan there was a common system of village communities, ruled by the five greybeards chosen by the villagers, who were the wisest owls among the people, the Panchayat. The land was held in a manner conducive to the best interests of the peasants and could be redistributed from time to time according to ancestral shares. Grazing rights were

held in common and the cattle was owned by individuals. The English broke up the villages and handed the land over to robbers like my ancestors, who have reduced the peasants to tenants, with fragmentary holdings, or to labourers without a chunk of soil to wipe their bottoms with! . . . Now, the only thing to end this madness is to throw the corpses of the landlords into the Ganges and give the peasants their land to till—to establish Soviets. . . .'

'Ah, you are laughing at yourself, Kanwar Sahib,' said Srijut Tiwari. 'But there is a good case to be made out for you landlords: if the Rajah doesn't plough, then it is because there is something degrading in the upturning of the soil, something rather sinister. . . . I told you, I believe in the dignity of Labour, so don't think I am casting aspersions on our humble folk. But you will agree that the ryot has tended to become a crude, stupid, earthserf, a boor, an uncivilized hater of all beauty, a slave of the soil. . . . You gentlemen have been to Vilayat. You must have read the books of H. G. Wells. I admire him very much. He says that the peasant is the basis of the old order and a misfit and an anachronism in the new. If seems to me that civilization will tend to destroy the peasant. . . . Tell me, while I am reminded of books, Verma Sahib, have you got any novels of Hall Caine or Marie Corelli? I enjoyed *The Sorrows of Satan* — have you read it?'

'No, I have been reading Balzac in French,' said Verma, deliberately superior, in order, politely, to cut short Tiwari's claptrap. 'There is a book of his called *The Peasants*, which should be translated into Hindustani. It will please the landlords because it makes the peasants out to be cunning, and it will please the peasants because, in spite of Balzac, it shows the degeneracy of the landlords.'

'If there is something sinister in upturning the earth, Babuji,' burst Lalu, half bashful, half aggressive, after his long respectful silence. 'I will . . .'

'Vakil Sahib,' the Count corrected Lalu's mode of address with an ironical smile.

'Vakil Sahib or Babuji, it is all the same!' said Lalu bluntly, 'for he is talking like a learned man of the city. . . . If there is

something sinister in upturning the earth, its upturning yields bread. Those of you who have never yoked a plough to a pair of bullocks and turned the earth can never know the feel of cool sod on the hands and feet. . . . The peasant can't encompass the heavens if you leave him to plough with a blunt earth-scratcher in the sweltering sun. But redivide the land, create Sarkari farms and give every village a tractor or two, as Kanwar Sahib says they are doing in Roos, and then the peasant won't need to wash himself before shaking hands with you. . . .' After his outburst he felt that he had only succeeded in proving himself a crude peasant.

'I didn't mean to blame the peasant,' said the lawyer with a leer of impatience. 'I only meant that because the peasant has to keep his nose to the ground, his vision is narrowed, his soul is filled with superstitions and he remains at the mercy of his own nature, taking things for what they are, accepting everything as fate.'

'If the Sarkar passes a new law each day to protect landlords and their property,' said Lalu, now relentless, 'and there are thousands of lawyers to interpret these laws, the peasant can't but accept his fate, short of marrying the Judge's daughter!'

'Oh Punjabi!' exclaimed Professor Verma. 'Don't strangle Tiwari Sahib in your ferocity.'

'But, Professor,' said the Count with characteristic self-abasement, 'Lal Singh is right. If we had to live in close proximity to the land we would see it as he does. Look how work under the summer sun saps the peasant's strength, how the earth twists his limbs. . . . And, when the fruit he grows is stolen! Well, if his limbs are crude and his speech is slow, he is learning to know his enemies, while we men of property—'

'Property!' burst out Srijut Tiwari with a compound look of conceit, despair, insolence and uncertainty. 'For all his hatred of property, the peasant seems to love his own goods and chattels so well that he spends three-fourths of his life in litigation.'

'The moment you come to possess anything in the world,' said the didactic Verma, 'the world takes on another aspect.

From that moment you belong to a minority which regards the *status quo* as sacred and inviolable.'

'And from that moment you must be on guard against those who like to fling abuse under cover of argument,' said Srijut Tiwari, hurt but unyielding.

'You must be on your guard not only against others,' said the Count teasingly, 'but also against the possessions of which you are the slave. . . . Come, Tiwari Sahib, these dispossessed don't understand the difficulties of people like us. Now, think how much it costs us landlords to keep up appearances.'

'Better slavery to your possessions than slavery to any who can help to fill it,' whispered Lalu, bitter and venomous.

'I am afraid your struggle will not develop in this country, Kanwar Sahib, if you base it on hatred,' said Srijut Tiwari, ignoring Lalu. 'We must adapt western ideas to the traditions of our country. As Gandhiji says, our struggle must be completely non-violent. . . .'

'His is a very one-way non-violence,' muttered the Count, 'it does not seem to include coercion! And what Saishar says about him is quite right.'

'But Kanwar Sahib, Mr. Tiwari is right,' said Lalu with mockery in his voice, 'we must learn to love each other! In my village it used to be said by the elders, the ryot must learn to love the Raja, for the ryot was born a ryot and a Raja a Raja! Besides which, is not God Almighty a second cousin of all the Rajas and the grandfather of Jarj Panjam!'

'Oh Punjabi, keep quiet now, you can hit a police wallah, but you must not insult a Congress leader!' rebuked the Count.

An uneasy spirit of laughter went through the gathering and settled down to an embarrassing silence. The protagonists averted their faces from each other, as if they had not really meant to go so far beyond polite talk into the crystallized resistances of will. But just then Ganga came in with joined hands and announced, 'Maharaj, hazri is on the table in the "dening-room".'

As Professor Verma and his politician friend had come too

late for the meeting on the sun eclipse festival, something had to be done to entertain the exalted guest from Allahabad.

With that gift for lavish hospitality which was part of his inheritance from his feudal forefathers, the Count fell back on the customary hunting trip in the royal barge on the river.

There was a great deal of preliminary activity, because, to *some extent, the Count insisted* on modernizing this conventional picnic. He dispatched Ram Din to Partabgarh to get some bottles of whisky, cartridges for his double-barrelled gun, and to have his gramophone repaired; he ordered Badal, the chief boatman, to decorate the old bamboo-floored barge with carpets and cushions; he compiled a list of those who were to be included in the party—this last to tease Gupta, Nandu, Misra and Co. with threats of leaving them behind.

In the village of Nanakpur, beyond Nasirabad, down the Ganges, the Count said, soma was brewed, soma being the code word for Tari, the coco-nut palm juice which was the local intoxicant.

'To Nanakpur, then, we shall go,' said Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari.

'Except that there is a lot of the old Adam rusticity, which you don't like, on the banks of the Ganges!' the Count said.

'But Kanwar Sahib, there will at least be tari!' said Srijut Tiwari. He had not come to see a semi-starved mob, but regarded his visit as a welcome relief from the strain of advocacy at the Allahabad High Court, though, partially, he wanted to gain influence in this new mode of political struggle in which his agile lawyer's mind was quick to see possibilities of a future vote for himself.

For Nanakpur, then, the party was bound.

The old, commodious, home-made barge, with a brave carved prow, looked gay as she stood, decked with the best palace carpets and cushions, almost at the foot of the river palace in the rose-hued dawn, ready manned by Badal and a crew of four boatmen.

The exalted company trailed down tardily after sunrise, long after the servants had stocked the boat with food and drink, gramophone records, cartridges and two guns, one for

use by the Count and his guests, the other for the personal use of his younger brother, Kanwar Birpal Singh, who had been persuaded to give himself a holiday from the estate office and accompany them.

Lalu was sad to think of Maya sitting caged in the river house as he walked down the steps of the temple ghats and carved a way among the villagers, who were having a ritualistic early morning dip and admiring the great men. But the fate of all respectable middle-class women seemed to be a terrible seclusion in pardah till the revolution. As the sails went up, however, and Badal, sitting in state with the rudder in his hand, gave orders for the boatmen to row, Lalu caught the contagion of that hilarity which the irrepressible Gupta introduced into the atmosphere by somersaulting from one end of the boat to the other, and the boisterousness which was built up when Nandu tipped the clown overboard with the avowed aim of 'damping his high spirits somewhat.'

And, sailing down the Ganges from Rajgarh ghats, sailing through the mist of the morning which was only slightly disturbed by the sun, sailing down the Ganges which was placid and slow to the touch of the oars on the early summer morning like a pregnant woman swollen with content; sailing past the village temples where the priests had just struck up the bells and cymbals and drums and conchshells to awaken the Deity, or perhaps themselves, from sleep; sailing under the shadow of the river house; sailing past the sands on which the dead were burnt and from which the ferry boat plied to Nasirabad across the river, and where peasant women were bathing with flimsy garments sticking to their forms; sailing along with the two princes and their courtiers and the guest from Allahabad,—sailing down thus seemed to soothe the strain and stress of the last few days' activity in Lalu's soul.

'Ganga! Ganga! There,—he has been left behind on the banks!' Misra said, sympathetically smacking his lips.

And, true enough, the black demon who danced attendance on the Count stood on the sand on the left, small and aboriginal.

'Oh the ass!—how was he left behind? Fool!' the Count fumed.

'Maharaj, he forgot the gramophone needles,' said the benevolent Badal, the grey-moustached helmsman who had now crowned himself king of the boatmen by donning a Balaclava cap. 'Come, brothers, we shall go and take Ganga on board.'

'May I rape the mother of your chief-boatmanship, Badal, steer this side, the pigeons!' said Gupta in a shrill musical voice. And then he pulled at the Count and pointed at a flight of birds.

Before the Count had thrown down the cards of the first hand of flush which he had begun to play with Srijut Ladli Prashad, Professor Verma, and his younger brother, Kanwar Birpal Singh, Nandu got a running shot and killed three flying pigeons out of the four with a 4A cartridge.

'Ah, the son of a marksman, Nandu!' Gupta shouted in glee and struck the hunter on his head by way of a pat.

'Let us fetch them, let us fetch them,' shouted Misra eagerly, his thin, fanatic's frame suddenly stirred into activity. 'Let us get them before they float away.'

But a semi-naked boatman had already plunged into the *water and caught the pigeons, one of which was still fluttering* its left wing, while its eyes shut and opened, opened and shut again, till the shot under its wing spread the poison and closed its eyes in the last faint.

'Come, now, brother, come quick, we will take Ganga on board,' called Badal. 'Come, brother, Ganga Ram!'

Ganga, pathetic little demon, had already waded thigh deep in water and came up to the tail end of the barge, trembling for fear of the Count.

'Why, oh brother-in-law of an ape, were you sucking your wife's teats all this time!' the Count shouted. 'Lazy swine!'

'Forgive him, Maharaj, forgive him,' Badal interceded with the Count. And he ordered the boatmen to move.

The oars splashed a little, the boat veered to the right and then began to move on the placid waters of the Ganges. And the Count, Srijut Ladli Prashad, Professor Verma and Kanwar Birpal Singh picked up the cards again.

'Empty your pockets, Maharaj,' said Gupta, 'and let us play flush.'

'Yes, flush,' said Nandu.

They began the game while Lalu began to wind up the gramophone.

The sun had already soared high, and the mist, in the reeds on the distant banks of the Ganges and in the groves of Nasirabad, was scattering. The islands of sand in the river glistened with the sheen of silver where they were not boggy. The sky overhead had been washed clear of the stains of the night. 'Mademoiselle from Armentiers', the rasping sound of the war tune rose in the air, shrill and incongruous with the torrid glare as Lalu set the machine going.

'Sipon . . . sipon . . . sipon,' Gupta imitated the song in a shrill crescendo like the melody of an ass in love, and shamed the jerky lilt of the Tommies' chorus, till no one could help laughing. . . .

'Nandu, administer number two to the brother-in-law,' the Count said.

Nandu leant over Gupta, caught hold of him by the scruff of the neck and slapped him on the back of his head.

Gupta received the blows, as if he were accepting a just retribution for some misdemeanour, but struck Nandu a clear, sharp slap with his soft white Brahmin's hand and shouted in triumphant glee: 'Ah, the rape of your mother!'

'Shut up, you owl!' Badal whispered. 'Two pheasants, Maharaj! . . .'

'Yes, there,' said Nandu, 'On the bank.'

'Han, . . . oof, take the brothers-in-law!' said Gupta.

The Count had already taken aim, while Badal was steering the barge so as to bring the birds within range of the guns, but a brood of crows flew over the bank, caw-cawing and warning the pheasants of their peril.

'Those dirty scavenging crows!' shouted Kanwar Birpal Singh and, heaving a deep breath, grinding his jaws with deliberate anger, he pressed the trigger of his gun so that five of them fell upon the bank.

'Oh hai hai! What have you done, Maharaj!' Misra moaned, waxing sentimentally religious.

'Serve them right!' said Srijut Tiwari.

'Yes, the artful swine!' said Nandu with the dark black frown of the foiled hunter.

But Ram Din was passing delicacies to the company from the basket while Ganga was boiling water for tea on a primus stove, and Lal Singh had put on a record, 'I'm for ever blowing bubbles . . .' and the cards were being dealt for another round of flush.

Shrinking from the hard-boiled eggs which Ram Din was distributing, the devout Misra had slunk off towards the prow of the boat, taken off his shirt, opened a separate satchel he had brought from home and begun to eat his own breakfast of fried bread and vegetables, away from the rest of the company.

'Our friend, the Revolutionary!' the Count taunted Lalu, as the Punjabi was known to be kinder and more charitable in his interpretation of Misra's character than any other person in this crazy court.

'To a Brahmin spoilt curry is better than pulse,' apologised Lalu.

'Some can digest egg plant, some cannot!' said Misra. 'This is Kanwar Rampal Singh's old quarrel with religion, brothers. Just because I believe in cleanliness and purity . . .'

Purity, Akh! It is a leper, not a Brahmin who sits where we have discarded our European cow-hide shoes!' said the Count. 'Give me some whisky, Ram Din, to drown my disgust.'

'I must say, Kanwar Sahib,' said Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari, coming to Misra's defence, 'that you will never succeed in your work if you mock at people's taboos in this country. . . . I have no doubt in my mind that our Hindu philosophy tells the truth about God better than your communism. . . .' He seemed to be always waiting for an argument, as if his coarse body was just waiting for a pinprick, or the menacing thrust of a dagger.

'Which Hindu philosophy do you mean, Tiwariji?' Verma came to the charge with his peculiar love of precision. 'There have been so many schools of thought. And, anyhow, Hinduism is no religion, apart from the social organism of caste. Anyone professing any belief is a Hindu, so long as he

is born to one of the castes! And all this ritual is a good Brahmin trick to keep people where they are and to coin money through conducting ceremonials! . . .'

'I do not say that the communist idea of life is wrong,' said Srijut Tiwari, climbing down a little, as he recalled the argument of the previous day. 'I only say . . .'

'Of the two main motives of human behaviour,' Professor Verma began priggishly, as if the exposition of doctrine would make the lawyer believe in self-sacrifice, 'of the two motives, hunger and love, which is more important?'

'Hunger,' the Count shouted. 'So let us eat. Aré, Lal Singh, give me some whisky.'

'To be sure, hunger,' continued Professor Verma, waving the Count aside, 'for this is the source of all endeavour for the mastery of the means of production and consumption. . . . Then comes love, to devise the full sharing of life.'

'I only said the Communists deny religion,' said Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari. 'So it will never work in our country.'

'Nothing of the kind,' protested the Count impatiently, 'they merely explain how and why religion came to be. . . . They deny God, because they understand history. They don't need the drug of religion, because they can discover the capacity to live intensely in the new world which they wish to create, to live as a part of the whole of things!'

'Then they are in line with our shastras,' said Srijut Tiwari.

'I suppose you would like to interpret our holy books as some Christians do!' said the Count, 'who think that the teaching of Jesus can be expressed in such a way as to show that in them lies the source of communism.'

'Our ancient Rishis thought out all these modern western ideas hundreds of years ago, so we shouldn't slavishly copy Europe,' said Tiwari, falling back on the nationalist dogma. 'And our ancestors understood not only the whole of organic life but the way it transcends itself and becomes super-organic, God. . . .'

'Oh, leave this talk and eat,' said the Count, noticing that no one understood this abstruse discussion apart from the protagonists.

Lal Singh put on 'Mademoiselle from Armentiers' again while Gupta brayed another imitation of this tune.

There was laughter at this, and then they were settling down to second portions and more copious draughts of tea and whisky, when Badal suddenly whispered:

'Maharaj! Maharaj! those men on the bank by the ruined fort of Nasirabad, there — they are beckoning us . . .'

The company turned, upsetting the food on the plates, and looked towards the ruined fortress.

A crowd of men stood by a corpse ready to be borne away by a boat into the river, apparently a peasant whose family could not afford to pay for the cremation rites, and who were going to consign the deceased to the care of Mother Ganges, perchance she may transport the body to the ocean of immortality, washed of all sins, not knowing that it would be devoured by the fishes and the crocodiles on the way.

At the Count's bidding, Badal steered the barge towards the ruined fort, while the oarsmen got into the water neck deep and began to pull the boat.

Hardly had the boat reached the shore, when some of the peasants, who had surrounded the shroud, waded the river and ran, splashing and eager, towards the prow, while others still sat, silent and hopeless and heavy, only revolving their wide-eyed faces as they looked at the exalted company.

'Ram Din, get down and see what has happened,' the Count ordered.

As the Count's secretary leapt out into the water, Gupta jumped in after him, splashing madly.

'Bring that brother-in-law back and give him number three, Nandu,' the Count shouted.

But the clown had anticipated pursuit and stood splashing at Nandu, so that the water reached the barge and there was a ticklish laughter at the touch of the cold shower in the suffocating heat.

'Fool, death to some, amusement to you!' shouted Ram Din, turning around from the men who stood pleading with him and extending their joined hands towards the barge, as they spoke all together and gobbled up their words.

'Don't talk all at once!' Ram Din said to the peasants.

But at this an old, grey-haired man began to weep. The happy picnickers waited in suspense, probing the spectrum with shaded eyes for the meaning of the silence that enveloped the bank.

'What has happened, Ram Din?' the Count called impatiently.

Ram Din turned, made a reassuring gesture with his hands, and continued to talk to the man.

'Somebody has suffered greviously at the hands of Nawab Sir Muhammad Amin Khan of Nasirabad,' the Count speculated.

'The best thing is for those who want to stay here to get down,' said Kanwar Birpal Singh in the discreet and rather distant manner which he had preserved throughout the morning. Apparently, he was not so eager, especially after the riots on eclipse day, to enter into an open quarrel with the Nawab of Nasirabad. 'The rest of us will go and get some pigeons at Nanakpur. Why, Misra, it wouldn't do for us to get mixed up in any of this, would it?'

'No Maharaj,' Misra agreed.

'Ram Din!' the Count called peremptorily, annoyed at Misra's defection.

The Secretary came back, pale and slightly nervous, and said: 'Maharaj, the son of a tenant of the Nawab of Nasirabad was ordered to do forced labour and, because he refused, the boy was beaten so mercilessly by the Manager that he fell off a tree and died.'

'We will get down here, Birpal, and you and your friend Misra go to Nanakpur,' the Count said. And he ordered Badal to take the barge up to the bank.

'Say, Tiwariji, now how can you make the wolf respect the leisure hours of the dog!' Lalu taunted the Congress leader as they descended from the barge.

'We must get to know what happened first,' said Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari, lawyer-like as ever. 'We must verify the facts.'

'The facts, the facts!' said Lalu, pointing to the shroud, feel-

ing the added power of a new grievance rushing into his blood, so that he felt almost happy to have the chance of insulting the Congress leader, even though the opportunity was provided by someone else's death.

'Seems incontrovertible enough, the evidence!' added Verma coldly.

With their glazed eyes lifted above their joined hands, the peasants turned to the Count, some touching his feet, some stretching their arms, while the few, who stood by the corpse, came up, a hopeless blank look in their eyes.

'Come on, you are not all dead!' rebuked the Count. 'Come, what's happened?'

But the swarm crowded round him, showing their white teeth and raising tangled bushes of supplicating hands as they gazed emptily.

'I tell you, I won't listen to you, if you don't behave like men!' the Count said.

At this they seemed to edge away and collapse out of sheer fear.

'Get up! get up!' Lalu urged them, while Ram Din, Gupta, and Nandu began to drag them back, catching them by their arms, their necks and their hands.

But now they only sat up, crouching or kneeling, their hands still joined, their eyes still lifted with a blankness which their black brows intensified into a rudimentary abjectness, as if they had been reduced to the last limit of degradation, to the primitive state of their ancient ancestors, in whom waves of conquerors had instilled the darkest fears during the first awful days of history. The shadow of the old fortress, and the mouldering, half-buried, discoloured ruins of a grave of the time of a later conquest, filled the air with doom, casting an almost tangible weight of oppression. . . .

'That is the father of the boy,' Ram Din said, pointing to the old man who now lay sprawled at the Count's feet, praying with uplifted hands in the incomprehensible Oudh dialect, as he stretched his eyes to draw the tears that would not come into them.

'Get up, get up, you insects, worms, dogs!' raged Tiwari. 'Are you not ashamed of yourselves, of your beards!' And he gently kicked the old father.

'Let him speak, proud-moustache!' said Lalu with a gleam of ferocity in his eyes. He was aroused by Tiwari's superciliousness as he was ashamed of the men's spinelessness. And he tried to persuade the old man to speak by patting his back as though he knew and believed that though the peasant seemed sluggish and tongue-tied there was a core of dignity in him.

'You are lords and masters, what may we say,' wailed the father, 'if we complain to you we shall all be killed. . . .'

'Nobody will kill you!' said Ram Din. 'You know that the Kanwar Sahib will help you. . . .'

The old man opened his mouth to speak, but there was a curious bubbling noise in his throat, and his lips moved but no sound came out. He strained to clear his throat, but was caught up in the paroxysms of a protracted cough.

'Chandra fell off that tree, as he was suffering from fever, Maharaj,' put in a youth in dialect.

'Why was he up there?' inquired Srijut Tiwari, his lawyer's instinct for cross-examination overpowering him.

'They ordered him to go and cut wood, Maharaj,' said the youth.

'Who is they? Why don't you speak clearly?' asked the lawyer.

The boy winced and stood dumb as if he had received a blow on the head.

'Brother, no one will eat you, speak!' said the Count.

'Maharaj, he means the servants of the Nawab of Nasirabad,' offered Ram Din . . . 'Aré, speak to the Kanwar Sahib, tell him.'

'Maharaj,' the father gasped in a feeble husky voice which became short spurts of dialect. 'The Nawab Sahib's Manager says, "Who will put you out if you bridle your tongue and stay in your place?" They will kill us all for this. . . . My son, there . . .' And at the mention of his son he broke down again with an excess of grief which brought two comic tears to the whites of his eyes.

'Why didn't you go to the police?' asked Tiwari.

'The police will beat us if we go to them,' said the youth who had spoken before. 'And we shall all be evicted from the land if the Nawab Sahib gets to know.'

'What is your name?' asked Tiwari.

The boy smiled and averted his face, but there was a glint of that impudence in his eyes which had been suppressed in the presence of royalty.

'What is your name?' the Count reiterated Tiwari's question.

'Sangal,' the boy said.

'Acha, Sangal, tell us all that the Nawab's servant said,' urged Lalu.

The boy began, glancing furtively this side and that, as if afraid that the Nawab's servant would suddenly come and stab him. But at that stage a middle-aged man came running up, saying the coffin was ready.

'Where is it and who are you?' Tiwari asked him.

The man looked straight at the lawyer and said: 'I am Madhu, once a Yogi, now a human being, and I am looking for an old rogue, called One-eyed Sukhua, who disappears before a funeral and after a feast.'

'Tell us how this happened!' asked the Count, since this man seemed self-confident. Madhu, the ex-priest, proceeded to tell in a matter-of-fact voice, with copious references to the follies of One-eyed Sukhua and another peasant named Raghu, whom he described as the God-intoxicated.

At last the facts were assembled. Chandra had refused to get up from the bed, where he lay ill, to go and do forced labour; whereupon he had been fetched before the Manager of the estate, and flogged till he collapsed. But he had been dragged out and forced to cut wood. He had hardly climbed the tree when he had fallen and died.

The exalted company advanced solemnly towards the tree under which the dead body lay.

The peasants seemed to take courage from the determination in the faces of the great, and crept behind them, bent-headed and absorbed, wondering what was going to happen next.

They came to a spot where a woman, with her head-cloth drawn over her face, sat with Chandra's head on her lap. She

was shaking with the effort to suppress her sobs as she clung to him, waiting, waiting, in an utter stillness, as if expecting life to creep back into her son's frame at any moment.

'I am the boy's uncle; this is his mother,' said the weather-beaten One-eyed Sukhua, with a mischievous twinkle in his only eye, as he came up with a pitcher of toddy wine, followed by the God-intoxicated Raghu, an old shrivelled man with lines all over his face.

The exalted smiled at Sukhua's seeming unconcern about his nephew's death.

'To him it is nothing,' Chandra's mother wailed. 'To him even God's grace is not worth having, the drunkard!' said Raghu. 'Oh, don't bleat like a goat,' Sukhua said. And then he turned to the exalted and continued: 'All these people have got the habit of crying implanted in them so strongly that God keeps on giving them occasion for crying, Maharaj. I prefer to sleep, to eat butter and to divert myself. What is wrong in it?'

The company turned from the buffoon to look at Chandra.

The boy's black face, with a flattish nose, a small chin bristling with a few black hairs, and high cheek-bones, seemed to bear a look of concentrated fury, especially as his eyes, closed by his parents, after the body had become cold, were half-open and showed a red, unexpressed horror and pain, as if death were accusing life of some terrible violence done to it.

'It is difficult to believe that the landlords could be so cruel,' said Tiwari.

'Not if you knew them as I know them,' said the Count casually.

'Maharaj, if you speak to the Nawab Sahib,' begged the father of the boy suddenly, 'ask him not to turn me and Chandra's old mother out and evict us from the land, for we have nothing now, nowhere to go.'

'He cannot do anything to you, rest assured,' said Sukhua, 'Maharaj will see to that. You will have his charity and I have his blessings.'

'What is more, Maharaj will do something to the Nawab Sahib,' said Madhu.

'What can be done in this matter?' asked Tiwari. 'It will cost a lot of money to take anyone to court for manslaughter.'

'We will show him!' said Lalu coldly. 'We shall take this body about in a procession in the villages and gather the peasants.' . . . He paused for a moment and then he continued, almost challengingly: 'Tiwari Sahib, how if we take the body in a procession to Allahabad, so that we can open the eyes of all those who don't believe that these things happen?'

Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari looked furtively away, his face livid and distorted by the awkwardness of the situation in which he had become involved.

There was a frozen silence for a while. Then Ram Din shouted, '"Bolo Kanwar Sahib ki jai!"'

Lalu, Gupta, and Nandu echoed the call, while the peasants raised their feeble voices. Sukhua took it up into a falsetto. '"Bolo Chandra ki jai!"' the Count said, 'not "Kanwar Sahib ki jai!"'

'Tiwari Sahib ki jai!' called Lalu.

'Come, brothers, this is no time for laughter,' said Professor Verma reprovingly.

V

ALL the theories of progress, of the rôle of the individual in history, of religion and politics, of evolution and revolution, which the exalted company had been discussing, were to be tested in the crisis which had risen so suddenly. Needless to say that the leadership tended to divide up between those who stood by the superior qualities of the cool head in tackling this situation and those who believed in the solid virtues of marching feet. The purest theoretician, the lawyer-politician, Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari, reiterated that a suit could be filed on behalf of deceased Chandra's father against the landlord of Nasirabad to claim damages for manslaughter, that he himself would argue the case for a nominal sum, not only in the local District Court, but in the High Court, if the Lower Court did

not decide the issue satisfactorily, and even take the matter up to the Privy Council if the High Court Judges were so influenced as to give an adverse judgment. Ram Kumar Misra, who was acting under Kanwar Birpal Singh's orders as a kind of spy in the Count's room, agreed with him, insisting that a bit of money in the pocket of Chandra's father would be better compensation than the glory of a triumphant funeral procession for his son. Lal Singh, Ram Din, Nandu and Gupta were all for direct action. The Count had a bout of asthma, as though the crisis had been too much for him. Professor Verma tried to unite theory and practice, hurrying to get the newspaper *Naya Hind* out.

'I came here resolved to know the peasant's life and I realize that it is wretched enough,' said Srijut Tiwari, indulging in a kind of tentative heart-searching at the end of his visit, as he sat smooth, well-oiled and well-groomed, before starting back for home. 'Yet what can one do with them?'

'Here is something to be done,' said Lalu bluntly. 'That boy was killed doing *begar*. I have suggested that we should march with his coffin to Allahabad.' He regretted saying this immediately he had opened his mouth, but he was impatient with the greasy manner of the lawyer.

'Do so then!' returned Ladli, 'what is stopping you? But it may lead to riot, and hooliganism!'

'But if the procession does succeed in reaching Allahabad, Tiwariji,' said Verma more tactfully, 'perhaps you will get the Congress circles to receive it.'

'Of course, from the all-India point of view this is a minor affair,' said Srijut Tiwari, flustered by so direct a request and torn between courtesy to the liberal Verma and his exaggerated sense of responsibility as the secretary of the District Congress Committee of Allahabad. 'We have big problems before us, but I shall see what can be done. . . .'

After this there was a somewhat awkward silence.

Lalu felt that he had blundered in baiting Tiwari. He had really meant to appeal to him for help, to move his soul, but instead he had aroused the distorted beast in the lawyer. And he realized that it was his own accusing presence which, since

his rude shattering of Srijut Tiwari's complacency in the argument of the previous day, had aroused the Congress leader to his unsympathetic attitude. And, thinking that if they were left to themselves the 'bourgeois' leaders might be much more cordial, he got up to go.

'Watch that man, Kanwar Sahib,' Srijut Tiwari said to the Count even before Lal Singh was out of hearing. 'He seems to be an ambitious, unscrupulous, cleverish kind of fellow. One of those men who is disturbed by a gnawing sense of vanity. He seems to me to be an upstart. . . .'

'He has a genuine enough grievance, Tiwariji,' the Count said. Then he laughed and continued ironically: 'But, of course, he is a rude peasant, a grass-eater! And you know the grievance of the canaille! . . .'

'Oh, I don't mean to malign him,' Ladli proceeded, unconscious of the Count's foolery and eager to convince the company of his sincerity. 'But you will admit that he is somewhat self-opinionated. Seems to be resentful about some mysterious qualities in him which have not been recognized.'

'Actually, in spite of the fact that he was personally afflicted, he has devoted himself to the struggle with great earnestness,' said Verma. 'You see, he has been through the war.'

'And is perhaps shell-shocked!' added the Count humorously.

'No, it is not that,' said Srijut Tiwari, insisting on his analysis with the inveterate logic of the lawyer. 'But such men are dangerous: they have no particular talent, except for intrigue and a certain kind of cheap oratory.'

'Ah, yes, they are all like the rats, squirrels, wild rabbits, porcupines and parrots which run amok in the country-side and ought to be wiped out, especially in this phase of our national struggle!' The Count mocked more deliberately to show how well Tiwari's sketch of Lal Singh portrayed the lawyer's own character.

This seemed to go home. Srijut Tiwari began to wipe the perspiration from his face with the edge of his tunic and to clear his glasses. And the matter dropped from the conversation.

Of course, it was taken for granted that the leaders wouldn't

march with the peasants: certainly no one could be so impertinent and embarrassing as to ask Srijut Tiwari to do so. The Count's indisposition made it difficult for him to launch on a thirty-seven miles walk. And Professor Verma could better serve the cause by proceeding to Allahabad to arrange for the reception of the marchers.

Meanwhile, the comrades were to go with the peasants. There was one great consolation: the price of several pitchers of Tari were donated by the Count to enliven the procession on its way to Allahabad.

'Ram Nam sat hai!
'Rama-Sita! Krishna-Radha!'
'God's name is truth!'
they whispered the ceremonial calls, as they began, after sunrise, to march from the shadow of the ruined fortress on the river, a mile from Nasirabad, by a dusty track towards Allahabad.

They were twenty of them, fifteen peasants and the five revolutionaries from the Rajgarh. Lalu, Ram Din, Nandu and Sukhua, uncle of the deceased, lifted the bier, while the rest of the men followed in a loose group behind the chief mourner, Bhupendra, father of the dead Chandra.

The points of the sun's early rays were scattering the pressure of the tense, dull, sultry layers of heat which had stood between earth and sky all night, and vistas of freshly ploughed fields were emerging from the narrow oppression of mist and stretching into spacious distances, limited only by mounds of village houses, lowland swamps and the dense contours of the forests of Nasirabad estate, a mile away on the right bank of the Ganges.

'Ram's name is truth!' Ram Din gave the call. 'Rama-Ram!' And there was a smile of embarrassment on his face as he listened to the men behind him repeating the words, for he himself was the namesake of the God Rama.

'Ram's name is truth!' Gupta called with a raised voice, and the four other men from Rajgarh, knowing that the clown was parodying the call, they laughed as they unbuttoned their tunics to get more air.

But the other peasants half walked, half ran, with eager set faces, as if they were escaping from some evil spirit, their bodies naked above the waists, shining like seals with the sweat that poured down their backs, their bare legs covered with thick black-brown crusts of skin and dust, their voices subdued, as if their throats were hoarse with shouting 'God's name is truth,' looking furtively this side and that, as if with the fear of the consequences of this adventure. For, among the group who had started out, some five of the kisans were still very 'green youngsters like Sangal, who were actually field workers on the Nasirabad estate and had been attracted by so novel a plan as an excursion to Allahabad. The rest, apart from the devout shrivelled man called Raghu, and the blunt straightforward ex-priest-peasant called Madhu, who had joined up out of a genuine sense of grievance. Sukhua had been drawn by the toddy for which the Count had donated money and by the vague hope that through the munificence of so exalted a person as Kanwar Rampal Singh they might miraculously come into some money or land or easy employment.

'Ram nam Sat hai!'

'Ram nam! . . .'

'Ram!'

The strange, half-rattle, half-moan call rose into a rhythmic song, a kind of hushed hum, the accents of which cast a spell on the mind of all the marching men, which made them pace the earth quicker, which made their hearts beat urgently, as if the words defined not only the fear of God and the appeal to His benevolence but the bursting force of their unenlightened wills set into motion by some purpose: Death which was neutral, which left men helpless, had been turned into a positive fact, into a slogan.

The stray pedestrians returning to their villages after a dip in the Ganges stopped to watch the procession, but although most of them knew the aggrieved and the afflicted among them, they were overawed by the spirit of Chandra, which seemed to spread itself on the wings of the whispered refrain.

The obvious sympathy in the solemn faces of the onlookers made the procession shout the call of religion more loudly, and

they hastened their steps, till the short gasping hum became a crude, hard, hollow peasant song.

Singing this song, singing it louder as they passed by the booths under the steps of the little shrine where some *ascetics* were resting, they turned into a pathway made by the cattle which was known to cut through the forest to the north of Nasirabad and on to the main Partabgarh road.

Two lean cows with stunted horns looked at them dubiously from the middle of the track, where they stood munching at the roots overgrown among the fences, but refused to make way.

'Come, may fat blind your eyes,' Lalu called. 'Get away !'

The rhythm of the march was nearly breaking when Gupta advanced and pushed the cows so that they turned and saw the coffin. And, as if instinctively avoiding the dead, they ran ahead, raising a cloud of dust on the track behind them.

'We shall turn into the forest by the elephant stables,' suggested Sangal, who seemed to know every twig of the track. 'Then we can avoid the pastureland.'

The procession followed his directions. The men still hummed the magic formula for achieving Chandra's salvation with solemn faces and furtive looks.

'If wooden faces and wooden throats be good company I would rather choose a blind alley,' said Sangal, and proceeded ahead.

'God does not hasten, but makes no mistakes,' said Sukhua, huffed and tired.

At this Gupta, Raghu and Madhu, the ex-priest, rushed to relieve the foursome who had shouldered the bier.

And the monotonous hum of 'Ram Nam sat hai' 'Ram Nam . . .' 'Ram' continued.

Suddenly Sangal came running back, followed by two bull-dogs on a leash held by theGurkha watchman of Nasirabad estate.

'Bhoori Singh !' the boy said breathlessly. 'And there are other men from the estate waiting for us. . . .'

'Stop ? Wait, you rascally fools ! Deserters ! Scoundrels ! Wait, the manager Sahib is coming !' Bhoori Singh shouted

with the twisted accent of the hills, knitting his face into a ferocious scowl, as he unleashed the dogs. 'You dare to desert from the estate! .. Go, Jarj-Mary, run and get them . . . shoo!' And he ran with the bull-dogs, exciting the animals into the hunt lust with a peculiar gurgle from his throat, so that George growled while Mary frothed and barked and hissed as she ran.

The legendary exploits of George and Mary had imprinted themselves, like their bites, on the memory of the peasants of the Nasirabad estate. Terror-stricken, they stood spellbound for a moment. The corpse dropped out of their hands. And George caught hold of it while the men moaned and shouted, and ran helpless, like the pale ghosts of themselves, with Mary at their heels.

'Call the dogs, rogue!' Lalu shouted to the Gurkha.

'You wait,' the Gurkha said shortly, as his slit eyes distended and showed streaks of redshot violence on the corners.

Whereupon Lalu leapt at him and, catching him by the throat, lifted him while the Gurkha struck him with the dog's leash. But Bhoori Singh had been caught unawares. Lalu felled him with a blow under the chin and then swooped upon him like a tiger.

'Ram Din, take them into the jungle, while I hold this wrestler!' he called.

'Scatter into the jungle!' Ram Din shouted to the men. Nandu caught hold of George's neck and sought to relax its hold on the corpse. Unable to do so he dug his fingers into the windpipe of the animal and, straining with all his ferocity, strangled the bull-dog, who fell with a weird howl, writhing, gasping, frothing.

'Come,' shouted Sangal, excited by the hunter's feat and darting towards a field.

'Oh my son, my son!' wailed Bhupendra.

'Fear the Lord and run!' urged Raghu.

Madhu tried to rally the men, who seemed to be paralysed, as they moved in a dense clot by the hedge of the field, falling over each other even as they saw Lalu wrestling with Bhoori Singh in a furious tumble and heard Mary's grisly barks among the tangles it was trying to pierce to get at them.

Gupta ran to Lalu and with a 'Salé, may I rape your mother!' fell upon Bhoori Singh's naked calves, even as George had previously fallen on Chandra's corpse.

The Gurkha doubled over at a blow from Lalu, still struggling. But Lalu had taken the dog's lead and begun to tie Bhoori's hands with it, as he pressed the man's chest with his foot. The Gurkha now kicked furiously with his heavy boots and detached his calves from Gupta's mouth, leaving the clown's mouth to bleed. Nandu, who had gone off to tackle Mary, came back, however, and held the Gurkha's strong legs, while Gupta undid the leather belt on his waist and arrested the feet which had kicked him. Mary ran back to the watchman. Nandu, who could have wished for nothing better, caught hold of the dog and proceeded to deal with her with the skill of the professional animal-murderer. Lalu strapped the Gurkha's feet to the collar of the dead dog and shouted: 'Come on, boys, get the corpse and run!'

And, sweating and hot, he proceeded to help Ram Din, Nandu and Gupta to carry the body to the forest in the direction where Sangal had pointed. The excitement of the fight was in his bones, and he was intent on carrying out the plan he had so impetuously outlined on the Nasirabad burning ghats. This handicap in his way seemed to have made him the more determined. Ever since he had entered upon his insurrectionary career, he had failed to act with a singleness of purpose. He had never been unduly brave nor fearful, but he had been possessed more and more by the necessity to think, to consider the motives of his acts calmly as if he were recoiling against the impetuosity of his earlier life. . . . Now, suddenly, he had acted as if, for the first time in his life, he had found an occasion when all the impulses of his life from birth onwards, freshly schooled through the bewilderments of his adolescence, the experiences of his youth, the memories of his father's suffering at the hands of the landlord, the insults to his own person, the war, the disillusionment after his return, and above all, the death of his mother and the disintegration of his family, had flowed over the barriers which had blocked his way, which prevented him from lifting his hand to strike a blow for himself and others.

And, for once, he had not been too late for a contingency, but had, in the secure knowledge of Bhoori Singh's infringements, met the emergency, even taken advantage of it. . . Fortunately, in spite of the travails of the war and the sapping of his strength through years of internment, he still had a wonderful physical organism left. And the confirmation of his memories in the woes of others had sharpened his will into a hard and stubbornly masterful instinct, a kind of rugged, uncouth sense of duty which was driving him in a violent, all destroying passion across the dusty tracks. . . . But he hoped, after the event, that he had not gone too far beyond the limits of a pure defence, as it were. He was afraid that Nandu, the hunter, had perhaps been too unfaltering and direct in strangling the dogs. He prayed that he would be able to control himself, to save himself from becoming a brute while he was helping the peasants to exorcise their fear, raising them from their crawling abjectness to the dignity with which they would be able 'to hold the turbans on their heads. . . .'

They had darted into a freshly ploughed lentil field, which bordered on a patch of waste land, overgrown with coarse and sticky grass, over which the moisture from the forest beyond seemed to be gathering in layers of grey sultriness.

'Come on, come on, here,' Sangal was calling from the edge of the jungle with the prolonged shrill cry of the cowherd.

The men advanced, casting quick, apprehensive glances around, and whispering encouragingly to each other, as they discovered patches of the pathway across the ground, now dense with cactus and wild pomegranate bushes and palm trees and covered with patches of sand, as if the Ganges had, at one time, washed this plain in a flood and then resumed its normal course. The heat of the smouldering sun harassed them more than the fear which the sudden appearance of the Gurkha watchman had spread in them. And yet Sangal's voice beckoned them, louder and more resonant as it came across the aisles of palm trees and tall tamarinds, which defined the outer limits of the jungle, as if he were apprehensive of some other danger on the edges of the forest.

'Come on, brothers, come,' Lalu urged the men as they began to hesitate before entering the depths of the green gloom before them.

'Maharaj,' said Bhupendra, 'it is forbidden to enter the jungle, by order of the Manager Sahib.'

'The thief is king over nature, but we are out to end robbery,' said Lalu. 'Come, brothers, unless there is another pathway by which we can get to the river.'

The men followed with curious rattling, gurgling protests in their throats and the utter blankness of fear in their eyes.

But soon Lalu knew why it was forbidden to go to the forest. It was a deliberately preserved festering jungle across the countryside, holding good cultivable land for miles in the grip of all the ceaseless fermentation of insidious, claw-like vegetation, in which birds, beasts, insects and wild bushes grew bloated, lengthened out and decayed, till the hand of man could not reclaim it. About half a furlong from where the green darkness began, beyond the ruins of some dilapidated mausoleums, neglected and overgrown with moss, tall grass and the off-shoots of trees which clamped them to the earth like the long finger-nails of malevolent spirits, stood a modern hunting-lodge, with a garden around it, its European-style gabled roof resisting the pressure of broken Mughal domes, and spreading the oppression of that discreet opulence which is the peculiar terror brought to India by the English.

Obliterated by time, the pathway had here been redefined into a small road which the forced labour of Nasirabad had built for the convenience of the Nawab and his guests. Lalu recalled that the Manager Sahib of the estate had mentioned the amenities of this lodge when he had invited the Count and his friends to come and hunt here.

Suddenly there was the report of a gun.

Sangal came running back in a panic and Lalu knew that they were not welcome.

'The Manager Sahib—he carries a gun!' Sangal moaned rather than whispered, and stood pale before the corpse carriers.

The men hesitated for a moment, then pulled different ways

and scattered helter-skelter into the dense foliage which spread from tree to tree and bush to bush on both sides of the pathway. Even the sturdy Madhu scampered away.

'To the river, the river—this side!' Sangal called.

'Hey there, together, keep together, and to the river behind Sangal!' Lalu called.

'Don't leave the body!' Ram Din shrieked to rally the men.

But their calls were lost in the viscid air which seemed to suck up all sound, except the tread of distant horses' hoofs, which could be heard issuing from the lodge.

At this the whole group of men stampeded down the only opening which was near at hand, a kind of gash between two mounds of a ruined mausoleum, at the foot of which spread a hundred cement steps to the Ganges.

The sudden jolt with which the four hearse-carriers had at first pulled in four different directions and, then, agreeing on one direction, had bolted down the gorge, threw the corpse. It rolled down before them, unnerving the hissing toads and the beetles in their holes.

Nandu raced after Chandra' body and, catching it, legs first, hauled it over his back like a water carrier with goatskin full of water. But before he had begun to race down the gorge, there was a volley of shots and some lead passed through his head.

Nandu ran blindly, but fell over a boulder with Chandra's body.

Lalu and Ram Din hurried to him, vexed by the thorns, which spread in the cleft, and panic-stricken, for another volley of shots soared and whizzed through the forest over the track which they had left.

'The Manager Sahib is following! The Manager Sahib!' the peasant hissed as they hurtled down ahead of them.

Lalu looked up to the crest of the gorge and saw a figure in Jodhpurs and a peaked cap, revolver in hand, whom he guessed to be Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, the Manager of Nasirabad.

'See what you have done, swine!' Lalu shrieked, pointing to where Nandu lay bleeding. And, overcome by a sudden impulse, he ran up in a murderous rage towards the Manager.

But Hadayat Ullah had already turned on his heels and disappeared.

Lalu returned to Ram Din and found himself face to face with him. A twin gleam of fear and embarrassment was in their eyes, and Lalu knew that Nandu was dead. For a moment, he stood there looking at the two corpses, his heart palpitating, his senses dried of all content, dumb and exhausted. The rest of the peasants were sliding down the steps to the river, while Gupta was deliberately somersaulting twenty yards ahead of them, like a juggler in a fair. The whole situation seemed so comic in its horror that Ram Din burst out with guffaw of wild laughter.

'Oh my poor son!' the old father of Chandra sighed as he came to rest on the base of an ant hill, his face and arms and legs scratched by thorns.

'Salé! what about Comrade Nandu there?' his cousin Sukhua shouted at him. 'Your Chandra has been the death of Kanwar Sahib's follower.'

'Trust in God, brother,' Raghu consoled Bhupendra.

'Come on, trust in me,' Madhu said, helping the tottering old, father.

Conscious of his responsibility for the misadventures into which he had led them, Lalu bent down and strained to lever the dead bodies with trembling hands. A sharp odour of decomposing flesh shot up to his nostrils from Chandra's body, while his hands were smeared with blood from Nandu's neck. He sat up imagining the smell to be a whiff of the foul virulence of bacterial decay, ensuing from the vegetation of the forest through which they had come. But, as he bent down again, there was no disguising the stink of the corpse. And, in a flash, he realized that though Nandu's blood was hot now, it would soon be cold and the body would stink if it was carried all the way to Allahabad.

'We shall float the bodies in the Ganges,' he said to Ram Din. Immediately he became aware that, partly, he wanted to dispose of the bodies to escape from his sense of guilt.

'Han, give him to the Mother Ganges,' said Bhupendra with a sob.

'There is a boat here, hurry — the Sahib will be on you.' Sangal called from the foot of the steps.

'But Nandu's body is the only proof of this murder!' Ram Din protested. 'What shall we say to Kanwar Sahib?'

'Only Hadayat Ullah can turn the death of his dogs and the wounds of his watchman to good account and prove us to be murderers,' said Lalu. 'As for the Kanwar Sahib, our word is enough.

'God has taken him and there is no help, brothers,' said Raghu as he came up.

'But is this justice?' Sukhua exclaimed.

'There is no justice, brothers,' Madhu said. 'Justice is on the side of him who has the stave in his hand. . . .'

That settled the issue.

With heavy hearts and sweat-sodden faces, they lifted the inert, gruesome dead bodies and made their way towards the river.

The sun was overhead as they rowed away in the pleasure boat which they had found at the foot of the steps, after having thrown the bodies into the Ganges without much ceremony, except another call of 'God's name is truth.' Detaching wooden seats, draining-boards and the decorative fixtures of the boat, to supplement the two oars and the punting-pole, they strained to make for the opposite bank across the slow current. Sweat dripped from their faces and their heated bodies seemed to flash like sparks of fire where the sun-rays pierced them almost like the grapeshot of Sheikh Hadayat Ullah's gun, and yet the shadow of the forest from whose claws they had escaped seemed to stand, thick and compact in all the majesty of its oppressive strength.

> ' One, two, come on, brother,
> With all your force,
> Row faster, brother! . . .'

they sang in unison a refrain of the boatmen. This seemed to relieve them somewhat, as it knit their several hands together

unto joint strokes that carried them out of the range of the Manager, should he come with reinforcements.

'The butcher has the knife, but I did not know that he would flourish it,' said Lalu from the heavy gloom that had settled on him. He felt, superstitiously, that he had always been the undoing of his comrades, and he thought of Kirpu and Dhanoo, who had died in the war. . . .

'Who can rule out what fate has written,' the old father of Chandra wailed with hollow, tearless eyes. 'There had to be no rites over their dead bodies.'

'They will get to heaven,' Madhu assured them.

'From of old God is the worker of miracles,' said Raghu.

'I wish we had some liquid to moisten our throats,' said one-eyed Sukhua.

'You did not see the Manager Sahib as he stood there!' said Sangal, pointing to the jungle.

'If one and one make eleven,' said Lalu, 'then twenty units make a lakh: row faster, brothers!'

At that moment some voices were heard calling from the dull, grey foliage of trees on the left bank, and, instinctively, the peasants rowed faster, their bodies smoking with the smouldering heat, their improvised oars splashing the bubbling water, their throats gurgling curiously with the strain of activity.

Lalu shaded his eyes against the torrid glare and peered across the filmy haze on the water to the banks of Nanakpur. There was a lively assortment of policemen with blue and red turbans standing there, evidently to give them a warm reception with staves and hoes and handcuffs, as policemen were shouting:

'Come on, dacoits, thieves!'

'They can starch their clothes standing on the river,' Lalu said. 'Brothers — let us row downstream without exerting ourselves to cross from fire into mud.'

The peasants in the boat sat back exhausted.

'Oh, in what birth did we eat black oil seed!' the father of the deceased Chandra moaned.

'Let us row to Nanakpur all the same,' one-eyed Sukhua said. 'My throat is parched.'

'Abé, brother-in-law, whether he eats you or not the wolf's mouth is dreadful,' said Ram Din.

'What does the frog in the water know about the expanses of the desert,' said Gupta. 'Let us land at Nanakpur and get some rest. The police daren't molest us. . . .'

But there were loud hostile calls from the groups of men on both sides of the river and the argument was decided in favour of Lalu and Ram Din.

As the peasants relaxed and let the boat sail down without any help from the oars, the bellowing on the banks increased, even as their tormentors began to race along, showing their fisticuffs and threatening, but falling away chagrined from the gaps in the broken sides of the river.

With characteristic buffoonery Gupta took off his clothes and stood insulting authority with his nakedness, knowing that the police were particularly sensitive to such an insult.

After a short race the pursuers gave up the chase and the boat rowed down easily.

The men were silent and drowsy with the heat and fear, and rowed, automatically, obediently, unobtrusively, as if they were non-existent. The forest on one side and the high boulders on the other let no air pass, while the sun burned furiously, so that even the wood of the boat was like melting iron, and a faint fungus-odour came, pungent and acrid, into the nostrils from the distant swamps and the drying vegetation on the banks.

'A supply in the belt is necessary for the journey,' Ram Din suggested after a while.

'We shall rest by some village further ahead and buy some roasted gram,' Lalu said.

'And the tari,' reminded Sukhua.

At the mention of drink the doleful faces of the peasants brightened a little, and Gupta sang his own version of a song which seemed both like a shout of triumph and a dirge on the death of Nandu.

All day they rowed down the Ganges in the sweltering heat of a sun which seemed fixed, eternal, at its zenith.

For a while, for what seemed the twinkling of an eye, they stopped by a wayside basti of fishermen, whose shacks of straw and wood exuded the mixed odours of human excrement, drying goatskins and dirty linen. Here, Bhupendra, father of Chandra, and the other peasants, had a purificatory bath to cast off the taint of the dead, while one-eyed Sukhua, Ram Din and Gupta walked half a mile to the village of Patan to buy roatsed gram and three pitchers of toddy wine.

'Ram, I depend only on your support! Ram! Ram!' Bhupendra prayed a thousand times, a moan-like prayer, as he emerged from his ablutions.

'This is an isult to all the rest of us,' said Gupta, affecting an injured innocence. 'Fancy preferring Ram Din to me, and that bitichod would not even carry the tari!'

'He means God,' Raghu explained, 'the support of all life, on whom the whole earth depends!'

'Even though Kanwar Rampal Singh provided the money for the wine for the poor,' said Ram Din.

'God made him rich and us poor,' said Raghu. 'All receive the blessings of the Lord. . . .'

'They ate and drank at my expense, and gave the salaams to God!' said Madhu.

'Akh! if I reckon the number of years during which I have heard of this fellow God,' said one-eyed Sukhua with a contemptuous gesture even as he spat the bile of the tari of which he had already had copious draughts, 'he must be pretty old, for I am not a babe myself by any means. . . . And, if you think that my father and his father and all our forefathers are said to have worshipped God, I reckon the fellow must be a decrepit old idiot incapable of helping anybody. . . .'

'You are a good-for-nothing drunkard and a scoundrel,' Bhupendra shrieked, and fairly leapt at his cousin. 'If you hadn't quarrelled with the watchman, my son would not have died.'

'Oh stop it, brothers,' said Lalu, 'and get on to the boat.'

'Maharaj, this reckless ass of his father's seed gone half-blind!' began Bhupendra with a shrill eloquence born of his torment. 'He does and all suffer. . . .'

'Not to mention the loss of our comrade Nandu,' said Gupta with a ribald drunkard's laugh. And he reeled into the boat arm-in-arm with Sukhua singing: 'Sipon . . . Sipon . . .'

As they started again, and cleared out of the stench of the village into open country and had another round of toddy, one-eyed Sukhua saw Lalu absorbed in the surroundings and, catching him by the end of his tunic, began with a gesture which seemed not only danger of embracing the whole landscape but also the water:

'Maharaj, where the Ganges flows down from the north to the south-west, it feeds the land with the richest milk in its swollen breasts. . . . Swollen, Maharaj, like the breasts of the old bawd Bhadra of Nasirabad when she was young . . .' And he laughed and hiccoughed with such force that even the boat rocked, and then continued: 'Oh, Maharaj, where the Ganges flows down the loam track is the most fertile. . . .'

'What about the sands of Nanakpur and Bikar?' Ram Din queried.

'But, Maharaj, the centre of those parganas is a rich loam,' answered Sukhua.

'Everyone knows that the north-east of Nanakpur and Bikar is a stiff soil, full of jhils which are badly drained,' said Bhupendra. 'And also the whole of Dhingwas, the greater part of Rampur and the south of Partabgarh and Patti. . . . And, last autumn, the harvest was so bad. They will all be mortgaged up to the last straw. . . Only God knows what will happen. . . .'

'Acha, don't whine,' said one-eyed Sukhua. 'There are some others who have lost their land too. . . .'

Thus snubbed, old Bhupendra sat on his haunches, his head bowed into his hands, disconsolate and sad, while the others rowed.

And all day they rowed, with proper oars which they had acquired from the fishermen's basti, hurrying to cover the longer distance it was by river to Allahabad than it would have been by tracks and pathways. And all day they sweated like galley slaves, the liquid running down their dark, inflamed bodies, stripped of everything but their loin cloth, the liquid

which seemed to rise from their tuft-knots, so that it gathered in the creases of their foreheads and flowed down their cheeks to their chins and then in various rills and revulets across their frames.

'Hia! Hia!
Pull, brothers.
Hia! Hia!
Faster, brothers! . . .'

they sang in a chorus as they heaved, loud gasps of words which were nothing more than the natural utterance of their bodies in the act of rowing, except that, now and then, Gupta and Sukhua broke off on their own into a rough, ribald melody, strangely shrill and cheerful even though it smelt profusely of the toddy.

All day, as he rowed and sang and sweated with the men, Lalu devoured the undulating plains, broken by small uprises and ravines, he watched the shallow meadows, dotted by cattle outside the small god-forsaken villages, where the fields were mainly stubble, except for a few ricks of corn or mounds of hay around which men were gathered like ants. . . . And, as the heat poured down, as he saw the men and women churned up by the shimmering glitter of the cruel sun, he recalled similar visions of the countryside of his own village, to the north of which flowed the river Ravi. There was hunger in men's eyes, but of the scanty crops half was pledged to the Seth and a third to the Sarkar and what remained was seized for debt. . . . And, suddenly, from Bhupendra's talk, all this land, all the men here as well as the peasants in the Punjab, seemed to him a mass of mortgaged souls, waiting, waiting for the auctioneer's hammer to fall, so that they could become part of the nameless throng on the road.

Through long centuries, down through countless generations, the peasants had thrust their heads out of their mean little low mud huts, clustered among the fields which had only to be scratched with a wooden scratcher to yield plenty. Twining paths, meandering intricately across the land, had linked village to village in a network of tracks on which went the bridal

processions, on which the cattle browsed desultorily and along which mothers, sisters, wives went to tree-shaded wells.

And then had come the Angrezi Sarkar, like an invisible shadow, as one-eyed Sukhua had said, spreading over this anonymous countryside where men and women and children and cattle had grown and died, nameless, like plants. And this Sarkar had built roads and begun to push the peasants out on them by rolling up their land, the land which had belonged to them for generations and donating it to whoever the Ferungis liked.

Oh, the coming of the Angrezi Sarkar had been like the coming of a flood, a flood greater than any which the Ganges had carried through the centuries, a flood which had broken down all the old landmarks, destroyed habitations and crops and human lives in its torrential course, carving out other channels to irrigate, and spreading over all the waste land the breath of a new acquisitive spirit. Such a vast, gigantic transformation had it wrought that one could not blame it or praise it, one could merely stand aside for a moment and contemplate its potencies, stand aghast and gaze, wide-eyed, at its invisible, insidious presence, gaze at it as one gazes at a god, merely to see its magnificent, all embracing, omnipresent, omniscient being in action and to seek to understand its inscrutable, inexorable presence, to realize the reality behind its various manifestations. . . .

He himself had been thrown up by this flood; he had been embroiled in the new life that it had produced as an almost unconscious part of it; his individual destiny had been directly controlled by it when he had joined the army and had gone to war, to the war which had spread to every corner of the world, which had brought destruction and epidemics and famine in its wake, till life now seemed so uncertain that men were content to live just for the moment. . . .

'They had fixed the prices at which the peasants should sell their crops,' Uncle Harnam Singh had said, 'and the peasants had to sell whether they wanted to or not. . . . Bht they had not fixed the prices of the produce of the towns which the peasants wanted to buy. And they had taken camel-loads of

gold and silver from the country and printed dathas of paper instead. . . . And satta gambling had run mad in Bombay. And the harvests had gone from bad to worse, till only a miracle could save the ryot from dying out altogether. . . .'

And now he was on the way to Allahabad with the peasants to express their grievances to the new force which had risen to oppose the Sarkar, the Congress. Nandu was dead. And so small and insignificant they all seemed in their little boat, rowing down on the broad sheet of the Ganges, above whose overtones and undertones was a sunny silence which seemed to listen to every heart-beat. . . .

Suddenly, involuntarily, the lilt of a song which he had often heard Maya sing rose to his throat:

> 'Oh, do not go, my love,
> Do not go,
> The winds of home are free,
> Oh, do not go, my love . . .'

And humming this melody, humming it insistently, even sharply, he felt as if each moment of his life had been a sad parting from something sweet which had gone before it, and he was filled with a nostalgia that seemed to break the ardour of this political adventure, that seemed to shake his belief in the salvation of others, if it was to be achieved by breaking the heart of a girl like Maya, whom he had left behind with the most perfunctory of farewells, if it was to be achieved at the cost of the death of Nandu, the hunter, if it was to be achieved by his transformation into a bully who was dragging these peaceful men into an uncertain adventure, who had dragooned the men into the task of rowing all day and who was now turning a coward in his thoughts. . . .

And he was in a torment, as he turned with ever-increasing irritation from his broodings to lead the men in the rhythmic chant. Then, with ever-increasing anxiety he cast side-long glances at the elements unrolling themselves still on the banks, in endless, steaming low forests, alive with the whine of insects, or in a succession of steep gradients, or in the vistas of a

countryside where all habitations seemed to be in the grip of the neverending green darkness of ceaseless vegetation. . . .

> 'Do not go, my love,
> Do not go . . .'

the song went through him with the anguish of a heart which was torn between his two selves, between the adolescent who had been bred in a world which believed in another kind of love, in a tenderness towards father, mother, husband, wife, and to an inbred sense of devotion to God, to an inherited belief in another and blessed land and an equality which only death conferred, and the revolutionary who had become an outcast, wedded to politics, eschewing all contact with religion, spitting on God, and turning, cold and loveless from the memory of dead ancestors, and from his living wife, towards the abstraction of an equality, vaguely apprehended, to the service of men whose potentialities were yet unknown, towards comrades whose friendship, being based on the forceful wills and superior reasoning powers of the leaders, was so simple and easy as to be elusive and rarely visible. . . .

'Have I not been responsible for the death of Nandu! Have I not deadened all my love for Maya? Have I not been insincere to the idea of this Revolution by dragging these men through the wilds?' These thoughts stabbed him like rapiers as he sat, now rowing, now taking a breather. And a shiver went down his spine as he was startled by a crouching shape here, or by a queer sound there. And yet there was the fascination of a strange compulsion about these questionings. And yet there was the balm of an incomprehensible ache in him as his heart cried out for comfort in distress, as at a parting:

> 'Do not go, my love,
> Do not go . . .'

Thus all day as he rowed and sweated and sat back for a breather, only to start rowing again, he let himself be carried along by a stream of thoughts, even as he was being carried by the current of the Ganges, one image stirring a memory,

which remained deeply embedded in his limbs, almost like a superstition, and then struck the ripple of a previous memory, absorbing it, thrust the tide forward, turning a little, almost fading backwards as in the river's flowing, but urged on by another wave from behind, remoulding it and thrusting in on, towards the light.

But with the coming of the night he changed and became another man, the clear, vivid images of the day dissolving into insubstantial shadows before his eyes, even as the dazzling brightness of the sun scattered into patches of sultry mist beneath the iridescent splashes of crimson on the evening sky, even as the mounds of earth, stretching into the far-reaching plains across the groves, across the luxuriant masses of forest bush and terraces of corn fields, mingled with the swish of the Ganges, so that each sight and sound seemed to lean forward, an uncanny ghosts of its former self, dancing in the pitch dark with the grim faces of Chandra and Nandu, which seemed to have been exorcized from his memory and become the heavy, brooding, repellent figure of death.

> 'Hia! Hia! heave, brothers!
> Hia! Hia!
> Harder, brothers!
> Hia! Hia! heave, brothers!
> Faster, brothers! . . .'

the men sang tiredly, whenever the elements seemed to look down upon them too fearsomely and overpoweringly. And they strained to row with all their might, bending together and unbending, panting for breath and sweating, as they kept their eyes fixed to their course in order to keep clear of shallow waters and to escape the larger eyes of nature.

But oh! the uncanny shores of the Ganges at night!

For hours they could see nothing except the dark lines of turbid vegetation, interspersed by the gaunt, black outline of a ruined Mughal fortress, or an old, dilapidated pleasure palace or mausoleum, falling in the verdurous abysses, standing sheer on a rock, steadily shorn of its grandeur by the passing centuries, and re-establishing its old alignments with the dawn

of history, through the forest growths that were obliterating the work of human hands, through the jackals which howled, and the wild beasts and reptiles which prowled, and the insects which sang the eternal monotony of a timeless chant.

As he sat thus in the night, in one of those spells which were necessary to rest the aching muscles, to restore the breathing and moisten the throat, Lalu saw the sudden glint of something and, even in spite of himself, his soul seemed to surrender to the elements, his heart beat violently, his hands trembled, his face burnt, his ears listened like those of an animal at bay. . . . Overwhelmed with terror, and in a sweat, he fell back in a swoon.

'Sahib! Sahib!' the men called as they rushed to him, almost upsetting the boat. . . .

Numbed by the chill of the night, as they had been scorched by the heat of the day, they floated down to ancient Prayag, outside Allahabad, where the snow-white Ganges meets her darker sister, the Jamuna. The sun was already up and a dull, discordant roar hung over the islands between the confluence of the two rivers, where sat the usual priests in white robes on booths, anointing the throngs of the devout, who were performing their ablutions on this most sacred of all spots in the Gangetic valley.

They steered the boat to the banks of Prayag, which is a small village-like collection of dilapidated houses, with narrow streets, full of gutters of rubbish and dirty children and rags, nestling under the shadow of high lotus-shaped temples and charity houses. And here they alighted and became part of the shrill, chattering, rushing, mercurial sun-browned crowd of ceremonial bathers, who, having paid for easy access to heaven, were busy buying and selling cheap beads, soaps, bangles, brooms, scythes, fruit and greasy eatables to sustain themselves in this world; and blind men, paupers, and cripples who all chanted their snuffling ballads, begging for the gift of a pice.

Of the two-score odd members of the broken procession, the older half, led by Bhupendra, were in favour of getting a priest to perform the last rites for the souls of Chandra and

Nandu, so that the deceased could travel without hindrance to the next world, while the younger half, under the leadership of the boy's uncle, Sukhua and Sangal, were for going to see the sights of the town. After brief deliberation it was decided that each man could do as he liked until the time when comrades Lal Singh and Ram Din could go and contact Kanwar Rampal Singh, Verma Sahib and the leaders of the Congress.

For a little while Sukhua, Sangal and the youngsters followed the two comrades, past the temples through the intricate mesh of Prayag's gulleys and the narrow outer bazaars of Allahabad, which reeked with the sourly foetid odours of the tanyards, into the civil lanes, the elegant, bungalowed world of Sahibs and rich Indian merchants and lawyers, along endless metalled roads which led to the law courts, the English churches, the clubs and the palaces of the landlords, Rajas and great Government Officials The boys marvelled at the imposing signboads of big shops, stared through the enormous window-panes of chemists and general merchants, at the luxurious objects arrayed behind them, stopped to admire themselves in the looking-glasses of the tailors' shops, lingered by the luscious fruit arranged in neat tiers on vegetable stalls, stood to toy with the cuticle knives, the razors, the oils and the potions on the open-air barber's stalls, and ran hither and thither, exhilarated by the ringing of the bells, the shouting of loud bargaining calls, and the whole melody of sight and sound of an awakening Indian city. But even as these youngsters were living through the most wonderful moment of their first morning in town, the cruel summer sun was already beginning to burn fiercely, and the exigency which had brought them all here, with the added torment of the accident which had caused Nandu's death, tugged at their leaders' hearts. So Ram Din gave the boys some money to go and get themselves a meal at some cookhouse and bade them go back to the charity house at Prayag to rest, while he himself and Lalu ventured farther into the civil lines towards the Rajgarh House, past grim policemen who stood with their hands outstretched on the cross-roads directing fast motors, elastic tongas and

little old rattling yekkas, in which sat those few respectable citizens who could afford to pay the exhorbitant rates fixed by the municipality for hackney carriages in the capital of the Province.

As the two leaders walked along Elgin Road and Amherst Road and Ripon Road and a great many other highways, named after the various Viceroys of India, blinded by the glitter of the sun, and ultimately reached Rajgarh House, which stood with battlemented towers, under the shadow of the High Court, they were told by the dwarfish Ganga, the personal servant of the Count, that Mahatma Gandhi, the great Congress Leader, was in Allahabad to attend a feast given to untouchables at the house of Pandit Motilal Nehru, and that Kanwar Sahib and Verma Sahib had gone there.

Retracing their way across the polo ground and the unending roads, across the Victoria Gardens, past the University Hall, they trudged along, weary and faint with hunger and fatigue on the hot, breathless morning, until they got to a road at the bare end of which stood Anand Bhawan, so imposing and exalted a house with its beautifully laid-out garden that it seemed unapproachable, as if the dust on their feet would contaminate its precincts.

As they reached the wide gates in the high enclosing walls, they were more overawed by the elegant, finely dressed men who were going in and out of the house in phaetons and tongas and motor-cars. For a while they stood about at the door with other idle spectators. Then they tried to pluck up courage to go and ask a servant, who was standing by the marble verandah, the whereabouts of Kanwar Rampal Singh.

Luckily before they had accosted the servant, the Count spotted them from where he stood talking to the communist Sarshar, who had visited Rajgarh a little while ago, and came rushing out, effusive and hearty, though he still wheezed with asthma. Sarshar followed him and joined hands to greet Lalu and Ram Din as they joined hands to him.

'Say, friends, what is the news?' the Count asked, and led them all towards a shady bower, saying: 'Let us sit down under that tree.'

'Upon what tree does the wind not strike!' Lalu said cryptically.

'By which you mean that something evil has happened?' the Count said.

'From the tail of Sheikh Hadayat Ullah's gun some pomegranate blossom made Nandu's head a sieve!' Ram Din said.

'The illegally begotten!' shouted the Count. 'He will pay for this!'

'Except that murder was in the air that morning,' said Lal Singh. 'Nandu wrung the necks of the Nawab's two bulldogs, Jarj and Mary.'

'Nor will Hadayat Ullah's watchman be so willing to fight another time,' Ram Din said, compensating both himself and the Count with a deliberate arrogance.

That Nandu, the hunter, the poacher, the quicksilver firebrand, should have fallen to gunshot seemed ironical to the Count. He sank on to a seat under the tree and seemed to withdraw into himself and to become extinct.

They were silent for a while, but the Count kept fidgeting, coughed, and then began to pace up and down the garden.

'No one can walk into another's grave,' Lalu said to reassure the Count and to wipe off the intolerable sense of guilt which assailed him.

'Anyhow,' said Sarshar with a smile, 'Kanwar Sahib was hungry for imminent hazards . . .'

'I have thought of an idea,' the Count began in his familiar garrulous vein, though he seemed husky, 'just to show that you don't have all the bright ideas! . . . You have probably heard that Mahatma Gandhi is here. Well, the Mahatma once went to Champaran in Bihar, where the ryots were being oppressed by the indigo planters. Perhaps, if you interest him in the woes of our peasants, he may agree to come down to Rajgarh.'

'Will a holy man become a house-dog by going to a village?' said Sarshar sceptically.

'Certainly these townsfolk are not interested in the woes of the villagers, unless they have a belly-ache,' said Lalu. 'Don't we remember the visit of Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari, whom Verma Sahib brought to Rajgarh.'

'You have got a headache!' Ram Din rebuked Lalu, out of respect for the Count.

'I agree it will be difficult,' said the Count, 'not only to persuade the Mahatma to come to Rajgarh or to get him to come to the riverside, but even to obtain an audience with him. . . .'

'So great was the saint's devotion that he became the unattainable,' said Sarshar. 'And when a man becomes a god, he turns his back on ordinary mortals and lives by a compromise with the other gods and Colonial Imperialism. According to this new god, Gandhi, the communists are evil people, in league with the Devil, who meet in desolate cremation grounds and desecrate the dead, spit on idols in temples, abuse the Almighty and trample upon all human decency. . . . But if you wait I could get the Railwaymen's Union to receive the peasants. We revolutionaries are so weak and few that we would gain from getting together. . . . Why waste our time in cultivating sentimental connections? . . .'

'Indeed,' said the Count with a nervous chuckle, 'but, as you know, God appeals to the imagination of our peasants and can still be exploited. . . . Of course, He lives to a strict time-table. But then, He would never be able to get through all the work He has to do!'

Rather unsure of himself, the Count murmured weakly, remained absorbed for a moment and then repeated his familiar phrase, 'Scarcity of men made my father a Judge,' and continued: 'I shall try and get you a few minutes' audience with Gandhiji if you wait in the garden here. . . . I shall become the ghost of Nandu and burst through the elements to speak! . . .' And, seeing someone he knew on the verandah of the big house, he ran back across the gravel unceremoniously.

The 'scarcity of men which had made his father a Judge' made him a very influential person indeed. And, strange as it seemed, the weight of his prestige impressed Mahatma Gandhi. So where for ordinary mortals could have succeeded n getting anywhere near the saint, the Count not only secured

an interview for himself and Professor Verma immediately, but got an appointment for Lal Singh for a few minutes before lunch.

Lalu had to hang about with Ram Din for a long while by the east wing of Anand Bhawan. They had sat watching a gardener, who was watering the flower-beds in the extensive grounds with a wonderful machine spray, while two members of the saint's entourage, almost naked except for loin cloths, were spinning yarn on primitive spinning-wheels at the foot of the stairs. They were amused at the incongruity of the European style life in the house of Pandit Motilal Nehru and the deliberate simplicity cultivated by the Mahatma's followers.

'In one half of the house the spring festival, in the other half the burnt ash of a sacrificial fire!' Lalu said.

'For worship the Mahatma requires silence!' Ram Din protested.

'And, as the teacher, so the disciples, I suppose!' said Lalu, imagining that the Mahatma would be like the spinning devotees. Comrade Sarshar's words had already biased him against the saint.

'These disciples are not men so much as the demons guarding the ladder to heaven!' Ram Din said.

For, truly, the detached, remote, bloodless naked men who sat spinning seemed more like relentless warders at the gates of the other world, so completely did the calculated simplicity of their lives seem to have pressed humanity out of them.

The air was heavy with the tense exhalations of trees and flowers as they drooped under the fierce heat of the burning sun, and Lalu began to feel tired and sleepy after his ceaseless activity.

But at last a sleek parrot-nosed, long-haired man, clad in a homespun tunic and dhoti, came down the stairs, and, twisting the viper's scowl on his face into a smile, asked the warders something.

They joined hands to him and, then, with their heads resting on their joined hands, beckoned Lalu.

Lalu stared at him blankly for a moment, wondering if the

man was Gandhi himself. But the tall, oily-haired man did not look like the small, naked, shaven-headed man represented as the Mahatma in the coloured lithographs current in the bazaars of northern India.

'Acharyaji will take you up,' one of the spinner-wardens said to Lalu, without explaining who Acharyaji was.

Lalu looked at his companion as if he were saying farewell to him for ever, and then followed 'Acharyaji', submissively, his heart beating with the same kind of fear which he had often felt in the presence of the Sahibs.

Upstairs, on a verandah, curtained off by screens of straw tatties, he was ushered into an even simpler and more workman-like atmosphere than in the marbled hall. For, seated in lotus seats with their backs to the wall, at little spaces, were the retinue of the saint: First a lean, bespectacled Englishwoman in homespuns, intent on a noisy, ramshackle, old typewriter which stood perched on a stool before her. Then an Indian female who was cutting papers with a long pair of scissors. Further, a white-bearded man who was grinding some herbs. While at the farthest end sat a little lop-eared, toothless man with a shaven head, which shone clean like an aureole whom Lalu presumed to be the Mahatma himself, naked except for a strip of cloth, dictating something to a black god who sat on his right-hand side.

Lalu joined hands to the Mahatma. There was something in the stern silence of the great man's attitude which demanded reverence.

Acharyaji said somthing to the saint about Kanwar Rampal Singh in Gujerati, and sat down on the left and opened a cloth bag full of papers.

The Mahatma smiled at Lalu, a kind of brief, casual nod which set him at rest in the dry, formal atmosphere of these upper regions. Then the great man signed to him to sit down opposite him, and, without much ceremony, went on dictating:

'. . . I am a lover of cattle. I have tried to study the cattle question. Very few people realize that conservation of the cattle wealth of India is a major economic problem beset with

many complexities.... Adulteration of ghee has always been one of these. During the last few years it has become a growing menace owing to the import of cheap vegetable oil miscalled ghee, because of its having been congealed and otherwise made to look like ghee.... The protection of the cow.... I call myself a Sanatani Hindu and am therefore pledged to the protection of the cow....'

Lalu wanted to smile at the excess of solemnity in the Mahatma's tone as he spoke about cows. And yet there was a sincerity in the great man's diction, as he expressed his beliefs, however ridiculous those beliefs seemed to be. Lalu had not quite expected the Mahatma to define his religion so narrowly as to call himself a Sanatani Hindu, a sect which was notorious for its conservative orthodoxy. And he wondered how this man, who had been to Europe and who had imbibed so much learning, could talk like that.... But the Mahatma seemed, with his emaciated, dark flesh, covered with a rag, to have brought himself to the level of a peasant, and that filled Lalu with the hope that he may be kind to the cause which he himself espoused.... So he waited patiently.... The little snake eyes of Acharyaji met his, however, furtive and contemptuous, and he felt uncomfortable. The atmosphere was oppressive with silence, only disturbed by the dull thud of the noisy typewriter. Lalu hung his head down....

The Mahatma seemed to be pouring out his thoughts to his scribe, from the sublime to the ridiculous, and from the puerile to the profound, without raising his voice in the least:

'Suffering is the mark of the human tribe. It is an eternal law. The mother suffers so that the child may live. Life comes out of death. The condition of wheat growing is that the seed grain should perish. No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of suffering.... It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone... the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.... Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering....'

This irritated young Lal Singh as he sat waiting for the

Mahatma to lend him his car, for the talk of suffering went completely against his grain. He himself had suffered in all conscience, but he had *never welcomed suffering*. He had wanted to be happy, and he had suffered in this search of happiness because all the people around him did not beleieve in happiness. . . . The great man's teaching was no different from the teaching of all his father's saints, who enjoined people to purify themselves through asceticism. All these priests, yogis, sadhus and beggars who tortured themselves !—what was the difference between them and this enlightened man?

'What is your name? And who are you?'

The Mahatma turned to him so suddenly that Lal Singh was somewhat taken aback.

He hesitated, and then, thinking that a narrative of his life in Europe would give the necessary details, he gave a few facts about himself, describing how he came to be a 'revolutionary'.

'I have come across plenty of "revolutionaries" in my time,' said the Mahatma with a gracious smile. "They come to me knowing that they will get a patient hearing from me, and that in confiding their secrets to me they have a friend whom they can trust. As a result quite a good number of them to-day are to be found fully converted and among my co-workers. . .'

'As Kanwar Sahib may have told you,' began Lalu tentatively, 'I have come on behalf of some peasants of Partabgarh district, who have marched to Allahabad to express their grievances and ask the help of Congress. . . .' And he hinted at the particular incident which had decided them on this plan, the violence of the Nasirabad manager and his watchman.

'What do you expect me to do about it?' the Mahatma said directly, as if Lalu were disturbing the routine of his more important world activities.

Startled by the detachment of the saint and his directness, Lalu said: 'We came to you for advice.'

'The first thing that I can say to the peasants,' the Mahatma said, looking Lalu straight in the face, as if admonishing him, 'is to cast out fear . . . the real relief is for them to be free from fear . . .'

This impressed Lalu. It was uncanny how the Mahatma

had laid his finger on the first trait which was obvious in the peasant character, their terror-stricken abjectness. But, as if on the defensive against the Mahatma's criticism, he said:

'They are suffering from poverty and are weak, and they cannot protect themselves against the continual threat of being beaten up. When we were intercepted in our march on the outskirts of Nasirabad I called on them to hit back, and that had the proper effect. . . .'

But he felt too embarrassed to tell the Mahatma about the tussle with the Gurkha watchman.

'Your advice to them was utterly wrong in my opinion,' the Mahatma said, his face lined with a painful impatience, 'even if it succeeded in holding the enemy at bay. Strength does not come from physical force. It comes from the will. Non-violence does not mean submission to the will of the evildoer, but of pitting one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under the law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust Empire and lay the foundation for that Empire's downfall or its regeneration.'

After saying this the Mahatma sat back, wearily indifferent, as if the stress of conflict was too much for him; he seemed distant and unsympathetic to the biased, hot-blooded young peasant. Everyone seemed distant and unfriendly here, from the snake-eyed Acharyaji, who looked at him surreptitiously, to the black god who sat breathing heavily, to the females who seemed to cast the oppression of their silent wills on the outsider and to fill the atmosphere with a disapproval which was like hatred. So he sought to cut short this sermonizing and bring the old man to the point:

'But will you kindly come to them, Mahatmaji, and help them to imbibe some strength?'

'If they render implicit obedience to me, their General,' the Mahatma said, as if he were taking evident pleasure in enunciating his principles, 'then they should believe me when I say that if they spin and wear khadi and abolish untouchability they shall win swaraj and be free from oppression. . . . Mere mechanical action will not bring the results by which I

will have to judge their obedience. As I have often said, if there is one true Satyagrahi it will be enough. . . . Not one of his thoughts would be in vain. I am trying to be a true Satyagrahi. I know that many of my thoughts do not go in vain, but I also know that what I have thought and said about khadi has not gone home. I know the cause. I am full of *himsa*, violence. Though I can suppress my anger, the fact remains that I am liable to anger. I have been a conscious and persevering observer of the vow of brahmacharya since 1906, but I am not the perfect brahmachari that I want to be. For with me brahmacharya is the attainment of sexlessness, not impotence, but the state in which sexual energy is completely sublimated into spiritual energy. If I had attained that passionlessness I should have but to think of a thing and it would happen. I would not have to argue '

'But,' said Lalu, inflamed though hesitant, 'we were made as we are, with passions and desires. . . . Why did not God make us free from all passions?'

'Do not bring God into this discussion,' said the Mahatma. And he drew a deep breath as if fetching some extra strength from his will to subdue this upstart. 'God is neither truth nor non-truth, neither violence nor non-violence.'

'But it is due to Him that we have the passions,' said Lalu, tentative and relentless. 'If it was wrong to have passions, He would not have filled us with them.'

'He has given us all that,' the Mahatma conceded with a curious humility, and twisting his body again with such impatience that his forehead crinkled with deep furrows, 'and yet he has endowed us with the sense of right and wrong and also given us a certain amount of choice -- the choice between right and wrong, between good and evil.'

There was not a breath of air on the verandah and the Mahatma's emphasis on his last words seemed to subdue everyone.

'But, Mahatmaji,' said Lalu, trying to put a faint mockery into his flattery, 'so far as we can judge, you are free from passions and perfect.'

'No,' the Mahatma said with an exaggerated humility which

was contradicted by the sharp pitch of intensity to which he raised his voice. 'I must be allowed to judge my limitations. If I were perfect, I would not have to argue with you. My thought would be enough. I have fought many a fight. If anything, I was less perfect than I am to-day. . . . I had then to cover the length and breadth of India. I had to speak and argue day in and day out. Now if a fight comes, you may be sure that I shall lead it from my ashram. I am speaking and arguing much less than I used to. But the fact remains that I am far from my ideal yet. . . .'

The Mahatma seemed to be full of himself, of his own spiritual struggles. And Lalu felt himself lapsing into listlessness, as if he were being suffocated by the deliberately exalted simplicity of this egoistic, confessional talk of self-perfection. He wanted to bring the Mahatma to a concrete decision. But the aroma of moral grandeur, purity and simplicity that surrounded this place made him feel as if he were a huge, uncouth figure with large legs and big paws in a glass palace.

'The peasants are ready to do what you would advise them to do, Mahatmaji,' he said. 'They are ready for the fight. . . .'

'They are not ready for the kind of fight which I want to wage,' said the Mahatma, hard and determined. 'If they had been there wouldn't have been trouble in the Nasirabad estate.'

'That was because the peasants protested against the death of a young man through forced labour,' Lalu said.

'That is not the answer,' said the Mahatma in a slow, even voice. 'Even if they were ill-treated, non-violent volunteers should be able to withstand the suffering and then exert their wills by disobedience. . . . But what about you? . . . I have heard stories about you which are far from complimentary.'

Lal Singh guessed that Srijut Ladly Prashad Tiwari had repoted to the Mahatma on his experience of the Rajgarh struggle. And he knew that on his answer to this personal charge would depend the chances of securing the Mahatma's patronage. Had he been violent or non-violent? He recalled that when he had discovered that Gughi, Santokh and Co. were making bombs to kill officials, he had called that murder, and he had been spurred on to leave the Punjab. And yet he

had believed in his strong arm while he was tackling the Gurkha watchman. . . .

'So far as I know,' he said, 'I have never urged violence. I advised no one else to strike the landlord's agents, though I—'

'You did not, I am sure,' replied the Mahatma incredulously. 'But what would you say of a man who would ask people not to kill others and yet shows them how to pour boiling water down their throats?'

He felt guilty now, and weak. His face was covered with sweat and he felt he would have to submit rather than go on fighting this great man.

'If the waging of a struggle to redress the grievances of the peasants is violence. . . then I have committed violence,' Lalu confessed. 'Also I handled the Gurkha watchman roughly ! . .'

'Not the airing of grievances of the ryots but the invocation of revolution against the landlords is violence,' said the Mahatma.

'Of course, I believe in Revolution,' Lalu wanted to say. But he knew that that would completely ruin his chances of interesting the Mahatma in the peasants. He had guessed by now that the great man was set in his own ideas, that he was full of himself, that he wanted complete submission to his capricious will. For the sake of the ryots he would yield and put himself at the Mahatma's disposal, even renounce whatever superficial means he had employed in the struggle, for, after all, Gandhi was a wiser and older man, and certainly knew the methods of conducting a struggle better than anyone from the stories of his work for the coolies in Africa.

'If you will come, Mahatmaji, and talk to the men,' he implored, 'that will give them some hope. Only you can inspire them with confidence and belief in themselves. . . .'

'I have a very full programme,' the Mahatma said directly. 'But if they observe the rules I have laid down, then their emancipation surely will come. . . . At the moment, I am here to take part in the feast to-night when our untouchable brothers will dine with caste Hindus. . . . . Ask the peasants to come to that meal.'

'That I shall, because they will be happy to have a good meal for once,' Lalu said with a twinkle in his eye, elated and grateful enough at the condescension of the Mahatma.

'Don't let them overeat,' said the great man, responding to the boy's sense of humour, and his face lit up with a child-like laugh. The old man certainly had a sense of humour.

Lal Singh was aware that the Mahatma had reached the ultimate limit of his concessions. Sweating, awkward and apologetic, he got up, joined hands and, bowing first to the Mahatma, then to the various dignitaries about him, retreated. There were deliberate, faked smiles of courtesy on the faces of the Mahatma's followers.

The walls surrounding Anand Bhawan, as well as the façade of the house and the flower-beds in the garden, were lit up with little red, green, yellow and white electric lamps, as if it were the feast of lanterns. And huge sizzlings gas lamps stood in the courtyard, illuminating the faces of the hundreds of guests, who already sat in lotus seats in long rows on mats, with leaf dishes before them, while clean-apparelled servants were distributing food as they flashed across with quicksilver efficiency. Exalted hosts in silks moved to and fro under the canopy supervising the giant feast.

Lalu led the peasants to the gates of the big house, but the men were too frightened of the discreet, exalted atmosphere of the palace and hesitated to enter. Serfed for generations, brought up to respect the rich and to keep their distance, fundamentally unworthy in the eyes of society, they dared not even stare at this palace, for less intrude across its red-gravelled path on to the evenly mown grass beds to the carpets and mats under the canopy. Instead, they just lowered their heads, as if they were plucking the sharp prying glances from their eyes and withdrawing into the safety of their own untrespassing hearts, lapsing into the abjectness which was so soft and deep a shelter against the wide-open world.

'Come, brothers, there are other people there, don't be frightened,' Lal Singh pleaded.

'Come on,' urged Ram Din.

'Yes, brothers, which is best, to eat mangoes or to see other people sucking them!' said Gupta. 'Come.'

'Or to see other guests with full bellies when there is hunger in our own stomachs,' said One-eyed Sukhua.

'Your Saint Kabir was a weaver,' said Madhu, the ex-priest. 'And he ate with the untouchables.'

But the older peasants, Bhupendra and Raghu, began to turn away with shame, while Sangal and the younger ones peered at the gala scene with furtive excitement.

A servant of the house came menacingly as he saw the crowd hovering on the gateway, and, blocking it against the entry of the carriages of exalted guests, shouted:

'Clear out of there, this is no fair, get away!'

Lal Singh told him that they wanted Kanwar Rampal Singh and asked him if he would go and fetch him.

The august name of the princeling startled the servant somewhat and he looked dubiously about for a moment.

'Go and fetch him!' Lalu said peremptorily.

And the servant proceeded towards the canopy.

'Come on, brothers,' Lalu urged after his Victory over the servant of the big house.

But the peasants had begun to scatter, embarrassed that the house which had invited them to the feast had now found out how ignoble they were and turned them away.

The Count came lurching along the red gravel, ahead of the palace servant, a broad grin on his face.

'Say, friends, why don't you come in?' he said in a mixture of English and dialect. 'And to think that Gandhiji himself had given you an invitation to dinner. Come, don't be afraid. No one will eat you—in fact you can eat everything that is put before you!'

A word of the princeling was enough to constitute a behest and to rally them. The servant of the house now beckoned them and they began to enter gingerly, laughing nervously a little, as if they were shocked to see themselves emerging from their own ambience.

Lurching a little and unsteady, but hilarious, hearty and apparently a bit tipsy, the Count left them, saying:

'Call on God, and do justice to the meal.'

Flustered, bent-headed, stampeding and falling on each other, the men hurried as if they wanted to become invisible.

'Look before you leap into the cauldron of food,' Lalu mocked, and there was timid laughter.

Once they had sat down they felt more comfortable, as they saw rows of dark-faced, ragged, loose-clothed citizens seated ahead of them, behind them and on all sides.

'Sit with your loins girded lest Gupta, the Bania, steal your food, for he is deigning to eat with untouchables and I am sure he has some purpose in doing so,' said Lalu.

'The ascetic doesn't stop eating because the dog is barking,' answered Gupta readily.

'Now then, oldies, bring out your best manners,' said Sangal with the snobbery of the young rustic tempted by the grand life. Bhupendra and others got up on seeing that they were actually dining with untouchables.

'Come, brothers,' Lalu jumped after them. 'By going to Benares a dog will not become a holy man, nor will you become outcastes by dining with untouchables.'

The embarrassed smiles of the peasants spluttered into bubbles of laughter and they sat down.

Meanwhile, the servants of the big house were busy serving food on leaf-plates to the newcomers with the alacrity of machines. But they had not finished when a sudden hush fell upon the rows of guests, humble and great alike, and a whisper ran through that the Mahatma was coming to give a 'showing.' All was tense for a moment. Then, through the rustling of forms, the hush-hush of exalted guests, from the perfumed dark beyond the many-coloured bulbs and shining gas lamps, appeared the shrivelled old Mahatma, dressed in a homespun tunic and dhoti, seemingly like any down-and-out peasant, except that he wore steel-rimmed glasses, a distinction which not even the ryots most in danger of blindness could afford.

He joined hands to the guests and then rose to a raised platform, helped on by Pandit Motilal Nehru, a refined, handsome figure clad in milk-white homespuns, and a number of dignitaries.

After he had sat down, there was another moment of silence during which he looked round, while the congregation looked alternately at the luscious food before it and the great man above.

Then the Mahatma began to speak in a simple, toneless voice, which was, however, distinctly audible to everyone.

'Brothers, before you begin to eat, I would like you to join with me and pray to God to purify our hearts of the sin of untouchability. For, even as to-night you are seated together, members of all castes, high and low, your souls are united and your hearts throb with one idea: that you will never think of any untouchable as an outcaste, but as a son of God. . . Now close your eyes for a moment and pray to God with me that our hearts be purified. . . .'

There was a pause disturbed by the coughs, whispers, shufflings and stirrings that accompany any sudden attempt at the cultivation of a deliberate silence. Then the pause became a protracted moment, during which the food seemed to everyone to be growing stale, and it seemed as if the Mahatma's eyes would never open. But at length the tips of the saint's ears pricked up, his neck unbent and his mouth opened:

'I can see that you are hungry and I shall not stand between you and the feast which has been provided for you on this auspicious occasion.'

After this the great man descended from the dais and began to walk away, amid cries of 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!'

Lalu was in a panic. For the Mahatma had not said a word about the peasants. Where was Kanwar Rampal Singh? And that learned Verma Sahib? Perhaps they could stop the great man on the way and make him say a few words. He got up and hurried towards the front row. . . . Before he had reached the dais by a circuitous route, Gandhiji had already crossed into the darkness from which he had emerged to give the 'darshan.'

As their eyes met, the Count and Lalu read the same concern in each other's eyes, except that Kanwar Rampal Singh shrugged his shoulders, smiled and pointed to where Professor Verma was talking to a sleek young figure who stood tensely at the foot of the dais.

'He came as an autumn cloud, rained a few blessings and went away!' Lalu said, unable to repress his disgust.

'But we have the ardour of spring in store for you there,' said the Count. 'Look! Jawaharlal there is going to speak to the peasants. . . . Hurray, Verma Sahib has persuaded him! . . .'

Lalu veered round and saw the solemn young son of the host, who was known to be a 'revolutionary,' standing on the second step and speaking:

'Brothers, go on eating!'

There was laughter at this interruption.

'All I want to say is that we have a number of oppressed peasants from Partabgarh district here, who have come to be our guests. . . .'

He emphasized the word guests and, then, flourishing his arm as if to assure a row of surprised citizens, he continued:

'Don't be frightened—not permanent guests of this city, like the swarms of other peasants looking for jobs! . . . No, they have come to invite us to come to their villages. . . . Well, I want to assure them that I shall come to see them in their own homes in a few days.'

'Bolo Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru ki jai!' Ram Din burst out at this.

And as the young figure was descending from the dais, there was an interrupted but prolonged shout, followed by the noise of smacking lips and deep resonant throaty talk among the rows of humble guests.

'Come, brothers, fall to!' Lalu said, coming back elated at securing the patronage of this only 'revolutionary' among the city politicians, and, seeing that the older and more orthodox peasants were not eating, he urged, 'Fall to, brothers, fall to!'

But not even the privations of the march, through which they had only eaten roasted gram, would make Bhupendra and Raghu touch the food, while the others gobbled handfuls of the delicious rice mixed with gravies of different dishes, spiced with the tastiest condiments.

The Count paid the fares of the whole group to Rajgarh,

and at midnight they caught the train from a dimly-lit platform beyond the gigantic porch of Allahabad Junction.

Apart from the excitement of the visit to town, the sum total of the peasants' reaction was a vague disillusionment, a feeling that towns and townsfolk did not understand the country folk. But as they sat or slept in the third-class compartment, which they had succeeded in reserving all to themselves, they seemed content, as if they had patiently accepted all that had happened on this excursion and put complete faith and trust in the capacity of their leaders to contrive their salvation. Saugal and two other lads were anxious about the kind of reception they would get from their parents on their return, for they had come away without asking permission, but the rest merely accepted everything, as if they were deadened by fatigue and submerged in the depths of another world from which they could not make the effort to emerge.

The leaders, however, felt somewhat guilty about having led these peasants on an abortive expedition,—specially Lalu, who sat silently by the sleeping Ram Din, the snoring Gupta, the half-awake Verma and the wide-awake Count, who was talking of Gandhi.

'"The spinning-wheel! the spinning-wheel!"' the Count parodied the Mahatma's voice with indifferent skill. '"I say unto you! . . . the spinning-wheel is the cure of all our ills in this destructive machine age. . . . If every man and woman! . . ." As if the charka itself were not a machine!'

'You mean a primitive tool!' corrected Professor Verma, roused from the bored quiescent separateness of the scholar at the chance of a hair-splitting debate.

'Why, it is the same process!' said the Count. 'The transformation of solar energy or power into mechanical motion, with the unemployed peasants as the engines, to be stoked with a little food, to be harnessed to the spinning to produce yarn.'

'The old man would be very shocked if he knew that you could interpret man-power in terms of horse-power,' said Professor Verma.

'Not at all,' said the Count; 'I am quite sure he knows that we are the blind bullocks who could be yoked to go round the

oil mill. Don't you see that he is an ingenious Gujerati bania, with the shopkeeper's sure instinct for making money. There is a sound basis for his spinning-wheel idea from the point of view of the townsman.'

'Akh! nahin Sahib!' protested Ram Din, awakening. 'This is pure malice!'

'Even hatred would be justified,' burst out Lalu, his mouth opening at the jerks of the train like a several-bladed knife, as he lifted his hunched head from the high square shoulders in which it lay knotted. '"When the leper is threatened with death he looks out for someone to take his place." Why, there is no devil more ingenious than the townsman in inventing devices to defraud the yokels. The land,—oh, the land must produce stalwart soldiers who can go and fight so that the townee can sit in his shop and fart even as he makes profits; the land must produce the slow-witted rustics who can pay double prices for cheap goods; the land must bring forth children, feed them, bring them up to learn a craft and then make a free gift of them to the Seth who starts a factory!'

'Look at our proud rustic! It seems as if he would murder the Mahatma!' the Count mocked.

But there was an intensity of felt experience behind Lalu's words, made intenser by the frustration of the protest campaign at Allahabad, and the peasants nodded in agreement as they rose, looking up to him like helpless dogs to their master. They were all proud of the land, even if they were field workers, proud in the satisfaction that comes from the deep somnolence that follows hard work in the fields, proud in the comfort that comes from the effortless use of simple implements, with limbs prone from generations to draw upon instinct for guidance rather than on thought, proud and stubborn in the defence of their simplicity against the agile townsmen, though frightened and inert.

'Gandhiji himself would agree with you that the townsman, the moneyman, is a satanic parasite,' said the Count, sensing the hurt in the dumb souls of his followers. And in the kind of impersonal, cynical whispered comment with which he was wont to illuminate a subject, he added: 'That is why he loves the Ahamedabad millowners so!'

'He himself looks like the devil!' said Lalu. 'With his large ears, his sunken cheeks and his pointed chin, only he lacks the horns on the head!'

'Such irreverence to the Mahatma!' the Count said with a mock-serious expression. 'What has come over us! We don't seem to understand high politics. The Mahatma knows that the spinning-wheel is a good slogan, though he also knows that all the yarn necessary for the needs of the country cannot be provided by hand spinning. So he shuts a corner of his left eye behind his glasses and winks at the factory-wallahs to go ahead with their plans. All that is necessary to cover up the double-dealing is a mystical phrase! . . . So to speak his right hand, the giver of blessings, does not see what his left hand, with the bags of gold, is doing.'

'The man is a physical deformity!' shouted Lalu, thrusting another dagger into the arrogant remoteness of the Mahatma which he had not been able to penetrate during his interview. And then he set about to chop up the carcase like a butcher. 'His right hand is much longer than his left; his eyes dip inwards like a crook's and are blind to what he doesn't want to see; his belly is knotted up with constipated entrails; his legs point gravewards; and yet he seems no nearer death. Some men can live too long.'

'And to think that he is the hope of politics in our country!' commented the Count.

'I had thought,' said Professor Verma apologetically, 'that if the Mahatma could be persuaded to come, he would do in a day or two what will take us years. He could form a Kisan Sabha in no time, because so many thousands of people would come to have a *darshan* of him. And then he has a genius for joining issue with authority. Look what he did in Champaran.'

'He has a genius for joining issue, but, of course, he is a veritable wizard at withdrawing from the issue when it is once joined,' said the Count.

'What did he do at Champaran?' Lalu asked.

'Oh, there were some indigo plantations in Champaran, in Bihar, where the ryots were oppressed by the English planters,' said the Count, as if he were repelled as well as fascinated by

the talk about this great man. 'Someone took Gandhiji there, and, before you knew where you were, he had scored a victory against the planters as well as the Sarkar which was behind them. He settled down with his entourage to inquire into the grievances of the peasants, whereupon the planters got enraged. The Deputy Commissioner ordered the Mahatma to quit under section 144. He disobeyed the order and had to be tried, but the public prosecutor had no case against him. So the proceedings had to be withdrawn. There he stayed in Champaran, taking evidence until he had proved to the Government that a public inquiry into the ryots' grievances was called for. This was held and the ryots' lot was relieved. The planters' Raj was ended. Satyagraha, Truth, Ahimsa walked away with flying colours and set up the flag of revolt in Khaira! . . .'

'And left the ryots the consolation of religion and debt slavery, I suppose,' commented Lalu, pale-faced and caustic.

'And in Khaira, which is a village in Gujerat, there was a local famine due to the failure of crops,' continued the Count, less assertively, as though this was not quite so heroic a tale as the last. 'The ryots couldn't pay the revenue. Under the Revenue rules there should not have been an assessment during a year when the crop did not exceed four annas in the rupee or only a quarter of a full harvest. The peasants appealed for a suspension, because, they said, the crops were less than four annas. But the Sarkar was adamant. . . . At first the old man tried to secure a settlement by getting the Government to agree to the well-to-do peasants paying up, if the poor ones were granted suspension. The Sarkar agreed in letter but did not carry out the agreement in spirit, torturing the poor needlessly by attaching their cattle and property. Most of the peasants gave in though some still held out. In order to strengthen the faltering ones in their attitude of defiance, the old man asked one of his lieutenants, with some Kisans, to remove an onion crop from a field which was attached. Of course, these men were arrested, but it was a great victory for Satyagraha! . . .'

'And, of course, even the onion campaign fizzled out,' added Lalu. 'I suppose one of those miscalculations which the

Mahatma considers inevitable in his experiments with truth...'

Somewhere in the depths of his soul, Lalu felt the blind resentment of hurt pride at his failure, of which this cynicism was only a partial expression. Somewhere in the depths of his being there was the blood-lust of his peasant ancestors who had broken the land, a blood-lust made incarnate in a hate which devoured him. Somewhere in the depths of his nature there was the potential upsurge of all those passions which were entangled among the roots and stakes of the fields, suppressed by the taboos of religion for generations, but now smouldering like a volcano, seething with activity, brewing all the decayed putrescence of the past, and the new ideas and impulses, in a cauldron which seemed as if it would soon burst open and flood the countryside, which would sweep away the dead lumber on the surface, renew the earth and spread the balm of a fresh tenderness across it. . . . But then a sudden apathy possessed him, as if chagrined at his failure he did not want to do anything . . . . Always, he felt, he had begun to do things enthusiastically, ever fresh and new to a job, but he had invariably bungled everything. And now he was convinced of his amateurishness. . . .

For a moment, the self-love of the individual welled up. But, as he contemplated the men in the half-dark, deepened by the dead night outside, he seemed to get faith and courage from them. They seemed so gentle and innocent and immune from any of the violence he felt in his nature as they dozed or slept, breathing with half-open mouths and widely dilated nostrils. They would be so naïve if one talked to them about their plight and they would not dare to let themselves be mastered by their hatred against those whom they had come to accept as their superiors in force. And yet they were stubborn and would walk away if one of their prejudices was offended, as they had done at the feast, and they would resort to murder if they had a quarrel over a trickle of water in the fields. For, behind the abjectness into which the gentleness of their religious faith, the power of their priests and the force of their landlords had schooled them, behind the ashen deadness of their feeble frames, there still smouldered the energy of long

generations; behind the prolonged silences of the black clouds which lay heavily on their faces there seemed to be a strong enough resistance, the power for ceaseless activity even through dire agony and suffering. Who said that they had no staying power? They who seemed to crumple up and die so early, also procreated with the abandon of animal, . . . And they had stuck it through the trials of this march, while he, softened by the cities, was almost breaking through disillusionment. . . .

'Say, friend, how are you?' the Count said suddenly, thumping Lalu on the thigh and pushing a bottle up to his nose.

Lalu was startled a little but recovered immediately at the sight of whisky.

'Ah, I feel that way too!' Gupta said.

And, before anyone could get hold of the bottle, Gupta sprang from where he lay and snatched it from the Count's hand and applied it to his mouth.

'Come, brother-in-law!' Ram Din shouted, and without a word he stole the bottle clear from Gupta's hand and offered it to Lalu.

'You remain sober or your woman will smell poison!' Professor Verma cautioned drily.

'Now that you have reminded me, perhaps I had better not drink,' agreed Lalu tamely.

'Come, drink, drink!' encouraged the Count. 'What goes down the throat becomes nectar . . . and pass the bottle on to the ryot brothers there. We have got to get together again to receive Jawaharlal and to form the Kisan Sabha. . . .'

Lalu took the bottle and gulpsed a mouthful of whisky, making a wry mouth as he swallowed it. Already the strange heaviness seemed to be lifting off his shoulders. He shook his head, yawned and felt he should brace himself for the new effort. . . . But now that he had been reminded of Maya he was in a panic about her.

'Do I smell the smell of the luscious medicine?' One-eyed Sukhua said as he came to suddenly.

'Better than hemp and more potent than tari,' Madhu offered the bottle to him with the air of a connoisseur.

'When he saw butter the ascetic abjured God and left,' said Raghu disapprovingly to Madhu.

'To think that I beat my son Chandra when once he drank *tari,*' *sighed Bhupendra as he still lay in the corner.*

So conscience-stricken was Lal Singh about the girl by the time they reached Rajgarh station that he left the others to settle plans and himself fairly ran homewards.

The eastern sky was streaked with lurid stripes of red ochre and gold, as he cut through the dusty tracks, limned beyond the scraggy cactus, the bramble bushes, the stakes and the roots, by the blue-white line of the Ganges. Apart from the thud-thud of his steps everything seemed to be still and ghostly, as if the doom of the night had not quite lifted from the land, as if the shadow of the primeval nights of old had not been totally blotted out by thousands of years of daylight, as if life were suspended in the balance before some struggle which was near at hand. . . .

As he hurried along, he was somewhat frightened of the great expanses of the earth which stretched before him, and of the girl who awaited him, an apprehension which the weariness and disenchantment of Allahabad made into a kind of awe. He churned the stale bad taste of the journey in his mouth and spat it out. Then he suddenly began to run across the track as if to get himself in hand. As his chest heaved and panted with the deep breaths, he felt the upsurge of his will and he knew he could face up to anything. He had come through so much that he had learnt to adapt himself to almost all the awkwardnesses, though no amount of resilience in him could, he felt, transmute the differences in social attitudes between the delicate tendril reared in the hothouse of old Harbans Singh and the persistent core in him, who had discovered a desire for untrammelled freedom for himself and others and resurrected the most elemental sensations in his nature to help him to achieve it. And he almost regretted this attachment which bound him hand and foot to a private responsibility when what was wanted in him was a cold asceticism, and the breadth, length and depth of a nature capable of iron decisions. . . . At the same time, however, he felt that there would be no purpose in the struggle if

one had to be a hermit, like the shrivelled brahmacharyas which the Mahatma and Professor Verma were, that it was precisely because of all these wild and shifting desires which bound him to the pleasures of the flesh, the survivals from the past emotions, because of all those weaknesses in his nature, the longings and the yearnings, which made him a prey to all the awkwardnesses, that made the struggle worth while. . . .

These reflections passed quickly through him, and the very swiftness with which he could appreciate the circumstances in which he was engulfed seemed to give him an immense power, seemed to tingle his blood and enable him to encompass other phases of his destiny, as if a kind of mercurial fluid had started other movements across his nervous organism and made a quivering, trembling dynamo of him, an inhuman contortion.

Dawn was merging into the morning as he passed under the bridge on the Rajgarh moat into the shadow of the guava garden planted by Kanwar Birpal Singh. The thatched huts leading to the river house were forlorn and empty, and it seemed that the peasants had already gone out to work, except that an occasional peasant woman crouched by a smoky camel-dung and twig fire, watching the lentils simmering in the earthenware pots which they were soon to take to their menfolk in the fields.

Lalu hurried to the compound of the new palace, his heart beating fast with an eager love for Maya and remorse that he was not coming back to announce to her and to everyone the triumphant end of their march, which alone, it seemed, could justify what most people here regarded as the idle pranks of the eccentric Count and his followers. . . Now that he was nearing home he began to caper, like the proverbial dog with the smell of home in its nostrils. . . .

Before he had reached the main hall of the new palace, Badal, the head boatman-watchman of the estate, came up behind him, calling, 'Maharaj! Maharaj!'

'Hallo, "My dear,"' Lalu turned to greet him by the nickname which Gupta had given him.

Badal was breathing hard as he had been running and Lalu

waited to give him time to recover. But the old boatman was burbling something amid protracted coughings.

'You can't enter a little door mounted on a elephant, nor narrate the whole story in a mountful,' Lalu said, patting the boatman on the shoulder.

'Oh, Comrade,' Badal said, 'the heavens have fallen upon our heads! Oh, Maharaj! . . Umph . . . Oof ! . . . God in heaven has flashed lightning on our patrons! . . .'

'What has happened, Badal? Is anyone dead?' Lalu asked, concerned at the old man's words, for he had never known him get into a panic.

'No, Sahib . . .' Badal began.

'Nothing has happened to the woman of my house, I hope?' Lalu asked.

'No, Huzoor, she has gone with the young Kanwar Sahib and Prem Vati to Allahabad in the motor. . . but it is the orders which are worrying us,' said Badal in short gasps.

'She has gone to town!' Lalu exclaimed.

'She will be safe in the charge of Kanwar Sahib and Prem Vati for the while, but it is the future . . .'

'Future, what about the furure?'

'Sahib,' said Badal, tears of affection in his big eyes as he brushed the spittle off his moustache. 'The Count of Wards has warned Kanwar Birpal Singh about all trouble-makers on the estate. . . . I think that the Nawab of Nasirabad has been making mischief because you folk took away the labourers from his estate.'

'And what does Kanwar Birpal Singh say?' Lalu asked.

'Huzoor, he went to meet you all so that he could give you the news before you came back,' Badal answered. 'It is difficult for him, and we are all very concerned about our Kanwar Rampal Singh.'

'Acha, Badal,' he assured the boatman with a smile, and turned away to think of the best thing to do.

As he walked about, head bent and uncertain, under the neem tree, he suddenly saw a cloud of dust and, then, Kanwar Birpal Singh's Daimler rolled up, with the Manager's entourage and Maya, as well as the Count and Verma Sahib, in it.

'Say, friends!' the Count began, slipping down, seemingly gay and unperturbed.

'I was going back to Allahabad just now!' Lalu said.

'So your woman ran away!' the Count laughed as he and Verma drifted away with Kanwar Birpal Singh towards the palace to let the females assemble themselves and their belongings in comfort. And he sought to assure Lalu, 'She is safe enough in the hands of my brother and sister-in-law.'

'In the hands of your sister-in-law, though not of your brother!' said Verma, 'I don't know that any of us are safe in the hands of your brother.'

'Let us go into my room and decide that,' the Count said with an evasive smile.

VI

'WHEN a man of business comes to see another man of business,' the Count said to his brother, breaking the prolonged silence which had ensued after they had taken off their shoes and dried their bodies, 'let him finish his business and go about his business, so that the other man of business may also finish his business. . . .'

But Kanwar Birpal Singh sat tensely on the edge of the Count's bed, his proud small head bent heavily over his chest, as if he were waiting for the best way to speak his mind, the best way to reconcile the traditional respect for the elder brother with his determination to rule the estate. He could not appreciate his brother's way of putting things; the complaints of the Court of Wards about the activities of the trouble-makers on the estate disturbed the efficient manager in him: besides which, he had already chosen his side in this struggle, having joined the Landlords' Association for which Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, the manager of the Nasirabad estate, had been canvassing the landlords of Oudh.

Everyone's attention was turned to him, for they all wanted to know the worst, but he remained motionless.

As he did not speak for a long time, the Count began again in his familiar strain:

'Scarcity of men made my father a Judge and . . .'

'You are always trying to malign our ancestors!'

His brother interrupted with a quick flourish of his torso, in a way which was completely unexpected of him.

'No, only indulging in a little tentative heart-searching as a retribution for our sins,' the Count said. 'Just trying to wash off the guilt of my high birth, and to work off a certain disturbance in my soul. . . .'

'For lack of a woman,' added Professor Verma caustically.

'Yes,' agreed the Count disarmingly. And he began to pace the room up and down as was his wont, brushing back the hair off his forehead, wiping the sweat off his neck, and whipping himself up into a perverse boldness as he sensed antagonism all round him. 'And, if you exclude me as an irony arising out of a mistake by my father, I shall tell you that the exalted tribe of landlords has not been sedulously cultivated for generations on this soil for nothing by that remarkable force of history, the Angrezi Sarkar. . . . The Sarkar knows how to use us. . . . You should beware! . . . For instance, that little Court of Wards now—'

'You can laugh at the Sarkar as much as you like,' said Kanwar Birpal Singh, irritated by the diabolical humour of his brother and yet congenitally discreet. 'The Government could soon put us all in our places.'

'You mean it will soon put us all out of our places,' said the Count, and went on with his exposition: 'The Sarkar knows where to put who. When they were conquering the country, the English believed that the well-being of the State would be furthered, and peace and order assured, if the cobbler stuck to his lathe and the warrior to his sword, if the peasant was an obedient servant of the lord and the lord was the gracious master of the peasant, — so long as they themselves, the white overlords, were left undisturbed to smooth over the intricate and subtle problems of managing finance. And for this exalted purpose, they found it necessary to create us, the new exalted Squirearchy, like their own Barons of former days, us

grandees, who would, for the public good, be granted a right of property in the soil of Hindustan in lieu of a share of the fixed revenue. . . .'

'Of course, Kanwar Birpal Singh knows this,' interrupted Professor Verma in a conciliatory vein. 'After all, he is only communicating the objections of the Court of wards to our propaganda here, Rampal . . .' Since this visit to Allahabad, Professor Verma seemed inclined to be in an accepting mood. He had been apologizing for Gandhi in the train, and now he seemed to regard the threat of eviction from the comfortable household of his host as only just and fair.

'No, he will not listen,' said Birpal Singh, shaking his head and struggling to throw off the oppression of changeless suspense which lay on him.

But the Count continued, nervous, hysterical, like a madman: 'We landlords, the chosen, were the most highly respectable and estimable persons in this country, who kept our swords well polished, our beards well combed and our visages well tuned to the august and terrifying dignity of "Baronhood." We lived in awe of the gods, dispensed justice with a high hand and were, altogether, the pillars of a wonderful new society in which the landed institutions of dear old England were to be naturalized among the black natives of India . . .'

There was an insidious torment in the Count's voice now, a kind of embarrassment bursting through his limbs, as if he were angry at having to talk like that. And yet he seemed as if he were indignant at the manifest unrighteousness of it all, as he walked up and down, his fists clenched, his whole body strung up to a furious pitch of hatred.

Lalu sympathized with him, for he himself had felt torn between an almost religious impulse against the wrongs heaped on the people by the authorities, and the welling up in him of head-breaking, murderous impulses. But he wished nevertheless that the Count would stop wrestling with himself, if only to lessen the suffocating tension in the room.

The Count continued, however, though his voice had now subsided almost to a whisper. It seemed as if the threat of eviction had created a brain-storm in him.

'The experiment succeeded beyond the worst dreams of its originators. If we landlords could not whitewash our faces and become the same colour as the English, at least we had acquired the princely title of "Barons." Besides, there were other advantages. For, if the law of the land needed strengthening in certain respects in favour of property owners, it had our ardent support, as it protected us in the enjoyment of our justly acquired possessions, and kept those who possessed nothing in their proper places! . . .'

'But all governments are vicious,' protested Professor Verma peevishly. 'Are you so naïve as to expect the present French Government, for instance, to practice the Declaration of the Rights of Man to the letter? In an imperfect world all that one can do is to protect the individual, as far as possible, from too much hardship, to prevent the encroachment by the state on the recognized rights of human beings until—'

'The British Government in India,' burst out the Count almost in a shriek, 'made no declaration of the Rights of Man! No, it only decreed the permanent settlement! And, this, though faulty in some respects, for instance, where the price of honest brokerage was a little too high, had one great advantage in that it created a body of rich landed proprietors, deeply imbued with the British ruling class tradition of keeping the lower orders where they belonged, — in the mire! And it was the greatest security against any hanky-panky tricks of the peasantry, such as misguided bitterness, loose talk, or any other noisy tumult or revolt!' After this he paused histrionically, smacked his lips, and then continued, his voice losing tone as if it were chockful of bitterness: 'Hence your attitude in this matter of the Count of Wards' injunctions, Birpal.'

'Only there is no helping the defection of the perverse members of the princely order!' said Lal Singh.

'Even though the Sarkar taught them all the lordly virtues,' added Professor Verma, forced to mock at the Count by way of defending Kanwar Birpal Singh, whose only crime seemed to him to be the awkward situation in which he hed been placed as the manager of the estate.

'They are all bourgeois, *salé!*' said Gupta, repeating his gospel parrot-wise as usual.

'Yes,' the Count said with a wooden laugh. 'Yes, unfortunately difficulties sprang up for the Sarkar in the most unexpected quarters. For though the bulk of the "Barons," schooled in special schools, have always been ungrudging, sincere and loyal supporters of the British Raj, occasionally there arose such eccentrics as my late uncle, Raja Rampal Singh, who joined the Congress—'

'And Raja Rampal Singh's nephew,' said Lalu with flattering irony.

'Perhaps you will keep your mouth shut,' said Kanwar Birpal Singh, suddenly turning on Lalu in his own discomfiture. 'You are not wanted here! . . . Do you realize that, *Comrade* Lal Singh?'

These words from the usual reticent and proud Birpal Singh burst into the room with the force of bullets, sputtering, awkward and disjointed, half-threats, half-statements.

Lalu was taken aback at being the victim of this attack. For, in spite of his own resistances to the Manager, in spite of the fact that he had seen him rough handle One-eyed Sukhua in this very room, he had never suspected any bias in Kanwar Birpal Singh. But, perhaps, his silence portended some hidden resentment. And, in a flash, he thought of how the Manager and Prem Vati had taken Maya to Allahabad, and he had a vague glimmering of another possible reason for this outburst. But he tried to control his injured innocence and did not answer back.

'Don't you realize who is Master here?' The Count took up his brother's undeclared words and began to make a mockery of them as he stood and turned to Lalu. 'Don't you realize that behind the Manager of the Rajgarh estate stands the Court of Wards, with the head of the District as the President? Don't you realize that behind the Deputy Collector, the head of the District, stand the host of uniformed angels, the police? Don't you realize that behind the angels stands the Omnipotent Sarkar, the chief arbiter of our fates?' . . . And then he lifted his head defiantly and shouted as if to the air: 'But just

let any of them lay hands on my comrades, and the wrath of the very devil will descend on them!'

Lalu had wanted to laugh at the Count's speech, but his last words left his heart pounding.

There was a silent concentration of the fumes of hatred in the room, an utter silence, like an oppression which would never break. And everyone sat, soggy and wet with perspiration, but with bated breath, as if they were waiting for an awful eternity to end. Then a dog yelped in the bazaar beyond the palace and the thud, thud of an axe could be heard in the courtyard of the kitchen.

'We shall see who is Master here!' Kanwar Birpal Singh whispered, raising his head. He stood, shaking with unexpressed rage for a while, and walked out with unsure steps.

There was another protracted silence during which they kept their faces averted from each other and explored their separate thoughts. Only the Count still paced the room, up and down with grim set jaws pretending that his equanimity had not been disturbed, though now that the solid fact of his brother's presence had evaporated his nihilism seemed to crumble into a nervous smile.

'Don't sit there, all of you, as if your uncle Birpal Singh has left you out of his will,' the Count said, working up a bluff of rage in his disgust at involving them in this quarrel with his brother. 'I shall see that you are all provided for. As for the rest, when a man becomes imbecile, his friends put him in an asylum; when people grow weak they put themselves in the hands of officials, without whose assistance they cannot turn or move or have their being. But neither Kanwar Birpal Singh nor the Court of Wards can turn us out of here, so long as we use Rajgarh only as our residential quarters, and conduct our propaganda from a separate office. . . .'

'There is Nandu's hut on your private estate, Maharaj, on the cross-roads,' suggested Ram Din.

'The rats have chewed it about here and there,' the Count said with a far-away look in his eyes, as if the landlord in him was weighing up the profit and loss, 'but perhaps, it can be renovated.'

'Why not set the evicted tenants to work on it and settle them on the land,' said Lalu with a smile of enthusiasm at the new shape which his old desire to raise a model farm was taking.

'Call it Kisan Nagar and get Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to open it when he comes here,' said Professor Verma, caught by the contagion of this new enthusiasm and to drown the tension.

'Come to think of it,' agreed the Count, 'we will set up a commune of the evicted peasants. . . .' And he hovered about with a smile as if he had committed himself to something very wonderful, as if he was reaching out to a point from which there was no turning back.

'Comarade Lal Singh does not believe in saying things which he will not do,' suggested Ram Din. 'And surely he will set to work on Kisan Nagar.'

'Only after he has placated his women,' said Gupta. 'But I could go and begin to make arrangements now, if Maharaj will give me just enough money for my girl's dowry.' 'Go, salé, son of dowry!' the Count rebuked him. 'Our comrade will do the necessary.'

'Promise to one and perform to another used to be my motto,' said Lalu, willing but polite. 'Now I shall have the two hardest jobs in the world.' And he walked out amidst the amused unconcern of the company who knew the difficulties of one job at least, that of facing up to the fury of a disgruntled woman.

He was really frightened of Maya as he walked up towards the river house, almost as if his manhood had fled. Until only a little while ago he had been involved in a battle of wills, and had forgotten all about her. Now, a host of private impulses seemed to possess him, as if he had to enter into combat with his own will, the centre to which he was bound. Perhaps, he felt, it was because at the moment there was nothing concrete in the outside world to cling to, but, more probably, because he had never really become master of himself, of his destiny, and was susceptible to all the weaknesses in his nature. And Maya was his chief weakness, the reflection of the desire to

which he had returned from the dreams of the days of disintegration, the fulfilment of all the sensuality in his nature, the first vision of a woman to which he had become fixed and enchained years ago and from which he had only been freed after his realization of her. . . .

He was tense as he went up the stairs and saw Maya seated on a stool on the verandah.

She seemed excited as she sought to hide her flushed face in the demure folds of her head apron. But she maintained an accusing silence.

'So you have come back,' he said at last, hovering around her and yet not daring to touch her. He was forcing himself to be kind, because he knew that she had never been able to adjust herself to Rajgarh. She must have felt ill at ease in the rigid purdah imposed on all women, except the servant girls in the palace, by the Queen-mother, and she must have gone to Allahabad at the instance of Kanwar Birpal Singh's wife, Prem Vati. And he felt conscience-stricken about her. But precisely for that reason he was resentful and hard, for her very presence brought home the fact that he was responsible for her. And in his pride he recoiled against her.

'I thought that if you don't appreciate me somebody else will,' she said with the woman's deliberate artfulness. 'So I opened my trunk, put on my best clothes and went out with Prem Vati and brother Birpal Singh.'

She looked rare and elegant as she sat, still dressed up. And, curiously enough, because he could not go near her, he felt furious with her, as if her finary, assumed for the benefit of someone else, was an insult to him. He was reminded of the day when he had come back home and found that she had spread all her holiday apparel, her colourful skirts and veils and blouses on the bed and sat indifferently, casting occasional tired, sad looks at them the while. He had felt like upbraiding her then, but he knew he only brutalized his own nature whenever he had recourse to admonitions. Now, he felt contrite and repentant. Even so he merely stood and scowled at her.

'I did not ask them to take me with them,' she said with the

suave woman's gift for the kind of innuendo which either broke a man into pieces or provoked him into the defence of his manhood. 'Birpal sent Prem Vati herself to persuade me.'

Lal Singh tried to resist the provocation, but he was reminded of Professor Verma's remark about Kanwar Birpal Singh. The quiet, seemingly inoffensive Manager of the estate, though moderate, commonsensical and safe in politics, wedded to one wife, and father of a child, shared a reputation for rakishness with the other qualities of his order. The Count, his brother, was always jocularly warning his courtiers off the servant girls in the palace and the more obvious young maidens of the village, by saying that no one should poach upon Birpal Singh's preserves. But whether there was any truth in these insinuations or not, Lalu burned with a silent fury at the merest suggestion of jealousy.

'Perhaps you know that Birpal went chasing us to Allahabad because he had orders from the Sarkar to throw out all trouble-makers from the estate,' he said, seeking not to put too much scorn for the man into his words.

'He is very nice,' Maya said in a subdued tone, instinctively on the defensive. 'He took us to the confluence of the Ganga and Jamuna by boat and to the fort, showed us all the sights and treated us to feasts. . . . He only hurried back because he was afraid that you folk might create a disturbance, and because Prem Vati had left the child behind.'

The very mention of the child was a further provocation. For, after all the seething discontent of days following their arrival in Rajgarh, when Maya had worried about what people would think of her living with a man who had abducted her, when she had sulked for the fullness of a life in which her status was recognized, after that war of nerves, she had started another, by demanding that he give her a child. The father in him had responded to the mother's more powerful instinct in her. . . . And yet as he had contemplated his destiny in the glare of sunlight, and seen how slight were his chances of being able to afford a child in the precarious, hired agitator's world in which he lived, he had been afraid. Particularly, because rather than put her faith in the struggle in which he was engaged, rather

than accept the idea of the work for which he and his friends were striving, she had, in her recoil, even gone back on the fashionable forwardness of the educated high-class woman in her, adopted an attitude of stubborn contrariety against everything he stood for, and decided to shift any responsibility that remained on her shoulders to a child. . . . And since the fear which held him in its grip, the terror of having to crawl on the earth, like the thousands of abject creatures with their families, who were evicted from land, held him, and since this fear seeped into the most sensitive chords of his nature and made him too ashamed to acquiesce to her demand or to talk about it openly, he had frozen into a diabolical sterness, whose hard negation seemed and insult to life. . . . So that when, in the dark of night, he seemed to conquer his fear and tried to take her, hoping that she would accept the evidence of his senses as a proof of his will, she turned him away while accusing him of a default, which embarrassed him the more intensely. So that they had become separate and apart in their bodies, except that the aura of the sullen pressure of Maya's silent will still held them together in the poisonous embrace of the cat playing with the mouse. He had brought himself one day to declare that, as soon as the Kisan Sabha was formed, he would ask Kanwar Rampal Singh to arrange to secure him a holding which he could cultivate so as to provide for a normal life, but her instinct to flourish was wild and immediate and uncontrolled, pampered as she had been in a household where her every demand had been satisfied immediately it was expressed. And it was extraordinary to him how open a woman could become in the expression of this most primitive and sacred of desires, how like a devouring beast, and to what limits of maniacal perversity she could succumb in titillating a man with all the tawdry weapons, from jealousy to pinpricks and low insults.

As if he wanted to assert his mastery over her in the face of the rival whose image she had invoked, he came towards her. He had not thought himself capable of jealousy, believing that just as he had looked at and desired hundreds of other women, who were potentially as capable of being his mates as Maya,

so she had a right to look at all the potential men who could be her lovers. But he noticed in himself a certain fear of Kanwar Birpal Singh now, and, in his kindness to himself, he excused himself for being resentful. If only she had looked at a more worthy lover, the jealous man's inevitable snobbery possessed him. . . .

He lifted her and put his face close to her. But he could feel her breath coming and going quickly, wafted over the perfume of her clothes. The very luxury of her seemed tainted by the suspicion of Kanwar Birpal Singh's caresses, and he drew back even against his will and quivered with emotion.

'I only went because of Prem Vati,' she said, noticing that she had trapped him, and inclined back to the feline softness of the woman inured to living in and through her man, slave to the will which she felt she had violated by the merest sign of independence.

But he knew that she was hiding her feelings to create the illusion of their togetherness, and he stood away, harder and more unbending.

Now all her strength seemed to forsake her, all her inward resolves to arouse him faded, all her defences seemed to be broken and she felt alone.

'Forgive me,' she said, coming up to him like a child with a pouting mouth.

Lalu stood still for a moment, looking at the sun-soaked river flowing evenly by the sandy edges of the Nasirabad estate. He wondered what had happened to the tenants from that enemy territory whom they had taken to Allahabad. He hoped that they had not gone back to their homes to meet their fate in the wrath of Sheikh Hadayat Ullah. They could be housed in the new colony which he had suggested as a site for the office of the Kisan Sabha. He must go and see the place.

As he swung round, his face contorted by the chagrin of the humiliation which Maya had offered him, he met her smiling eyes. Before she should assume the mask of resentment again, he caught hold of her and caressed her; a shiever went down his throat and a fiery blast covered his brain; his eyes flamed,

and he stood dark, warm, turbid and blind, the sweat trailing down his forehead.

'Childling,' he said, and took her as if to still the prostrate beating of his heart.

The ruined hut of Nandu which they had decided upon as the site for Kisan Nagar was not too dilapidated for restoration. It was a square, squat building which could be made into a simple barn with the labour of a few days.

Lalu collected all the evicted kisans, who had nowhere to go but the charity houses attached to the Rajgarh temple, and told them of the plan to build a new house for the victims of the landlords which was also to serve as the headquarters of the Kisan Sabha.

'We will dig round for earth in the time it takes you to requisition the money,' said One-eyed Sukhua, 'and while you procure the meterials we will finish the roof till it touches the sky!'

From the light in the faces of the others, he seemed to have spoken for them all.

'Only,' Sukhua added, 'if it takes water to knead the mud into dough, it needs toddy wine to grease the dry joints of the peasant's bones.'

Lalu feigned a sleepy walk, deaf ears, blind eyes and dumb muteness at the mention of toddy and ran round the site as if he did not understand this talk.

And they all set to work, Bhupendra, Raghu, Madhu and others digging fresh earth from the edge of the lake and fetching it in baskets to the barn, while Sangal kneaded it into a dough with his legs, and One-eyed Sukhua ordered everyone about, even as he did odd jobs, from scraping the worn plaster off the walls to collecting unbaked bricks which came laden on donkeys from Rajgarh.

And, soon, the preliminary arrangements were completed, the plans made, and the bricks began to be laid by the quick, dexterous, willing hands of the peasants, each of whom seemed to be an expert at building.

Lalu was filled with an enthusiasm such as he had not felt

for years. Each time he came back from Rajgarh or Partabgarh, after haggling with contractors and shopkeepers over the prices of materials, and saw the barn emerging into some kind of shape, he was impressed by the newness of it, as if the mere freshness of it was a revelation. For, although he had discarded the more spurious impulses for fashion of his pre-war village days, a simple, unostentatious, square barn in the open, modelled on the simple lines of the village mud huts, but away from the unhealthy drains of village gulleys and from the narrow lanes and bazaars of old towns cluttered anyhow with homes, was an achievement which definitely pointed the way to a new life. Those old towns and cities, built thousands of years ago, when there was no need for movement except by narrow dusty tracks and muddy alleyways, when the ass, the horse and the bullock cart had not given place to the motor-car, were half dead and useless, even though they had continued to stand till to-day. They were the diseased, decrepit bodies of old age, discoloured black and grey or dull vermillion, with mouldering limbs and rotting fabrics, the aura of a decadent grace about them, as they had seen the gracious of old days, but tainted, because they had been built by the labour of the slaves of marauding invaders, and essentially no different from the rubbish heaps which lay heaped around them. On the other hand, there was this nucleus of a new world emerging, rough and crude but wholesome, without the ostentatious trappings of all those apples and bananas which the new rich merchants of towns like Manabad and Partabgarh were hanging on the façades of their European style bungalows, without the tawdry array of motifs borrowed from the palaces of Rajgarh, but a trim, bare construction, which would fulfil its function of housing the evicted peasants and their families as well as be the office of their union, and generally keep the sun, the wind and the rain at bay.

'Come, Maharaj, are you admiring my skill?' called One-eyed Sukhua to Lalu from where he sat puffing at a biri under the banyan tree, while Bhupendra's wife, Sobha, was cooking a rice gruel for the communal midday meal. 'Come and see

it, — how can you enter a little door mounted on an elephant?'

Lalu had been to the station to get delivery of some timber and was on his way back to Rajgarh.

'Admire his skill, Huzoor, he builds grave upon grave, the waster!' said Bhupendra. The old man had an aspect of tremulous age, as if he had been broken with suffering at the loss of his son. The skin of his face seemed to have withered until the bones were sharp beneath a multitude of small fine wrinkles; his eyes looked out from their sockets with a sort of dim fear, a sort of blurred bewilderment as though he felt lost and forlorn in this harsh new world. His back curved thinly. His hands clutched a basket with weary fingers.

'Sahib, what can they know of the joys of air-houses?' One-eyed Sukhua said. 'They who are used to living on dung-heaps.'

And he puffed deeply at the biri, coughed and then began again, unsolicited, to chastise them. They think they are violating the sanctity of this site by building a new barn on it. Just because it is said that some holy men lived here once. . . . The water of the tank is stagnant and moss-covered into the consistency of ambrosia! . . . But my cousin, Bhupendra, there, has been partaking of the parshad and Raghu has been lighting a saucer lamp on its edges to propitiate the saints.'

'Go, brother-in-law, die, you, who killed my son!' said Bhupendra. 'May God curse you for your heresies, drunken lout!' And then he turned to Lalu with bleary, sunken, tear-filled eyes and said: 'Maharaj, if I hadn't been loyal to such a false saint as this one-eyed blight, my son would never have died!'

'Bhogat Mai,' said Bhupendra's wife Sobha, modestly, as she thrust the fuel sticks in the primitive oven, 'told me to burn an earthen lamp there, and to drink charnamat from the steps, and this wretch is giving us a bad name in your eyes, Maharaj. . . .'

'To be sure, Huzoor, God's name is good, and if only we had some holy men in our parts now, life would be different for us,' said Raghu, coming up like a prehistoric man, bespattered with mud. 'In the old days a priest could settle all quar-

rels between the Raja and the ryot for a few coppers and a meal offering. But, nowadays, Brahmins be lawyers and accountants, and there be no one to intercede on our behalf to the landlord.'

'Salé, your brother-in-law Bhoori Singh is a Brahmin by caste!' said One-eyed Sukhua. 'Why did you not offer him a few coppers and retain your lands?'

'Don't abuse so before Comrade Lal Singh!' said the boy Sangal, as he jumped up and down in the mud with greater alacrity.

'To be sure, Sukhua is right, brothers,' the ex-priest Madhu said as he came to fill his basket. 'God made the rich rich, and the poor poor, he also made the Brahmins the friend of the rich against the poor!'

'That watchman,' said Sukhua, 'could sell your soul to the devil or to God, whichever of these was the highest bidder!' *Then he spat roundly.*

'To be sure, One-eyed Sukhua is right about the watchman,' Sangal began to corroborate this story. 'He wanted to take me into the woods for immoral purposes.'

'Go, salé, gandu, don't you call me one-eyed!' shouted Sukhua 'So was your mother one-eyed!' And he threatened to get up and chase the boy, so that Sangal left the mud and ran, splashing, towards the peasants who were plastering the barn.

'Don't frighten that lad,' appealed Bhupendra. 'He is an orphan without his dead mother. Let him knead that mud.' And he strained to lift the basket he had filled with mud.

'So am I an orphan!' answered Sukhua. 'For what is peasant without land? So are you an orphan! For what is a father without a son? So is comrade Lal Singh, there, an orphan! For his father and mother are dead. Isn't that so, comrade? Everyone is an orphan! . . .'

'No one is an orphan who has faith in God,' said Bhupendra, as Sangal helped to adjust the weight on his head and he proceeded towards the barn. 'For He is the giver and the receiver. He alone is looking after my Chandra. . . .'

'But why doesn't He give back your son to you?' Sukhua

asked. 'Why doesn't He give you the best land, and lots of it, and gold ashrafis?'

'I want no gold,' said Bhupendra in a weary voice as he stood halfway to the barn. 'I have suffered for my sins, and for your sins. I had a good wife, and a son who was strong, worth his weight in all the gold of the Nabab. Since he is gone, I have no use for land or gold or silver. I only crave God's blessings. . . .'

'And the food of charity from Kanwar Sahib!' taunted Sukhua.

'But he has been hard at work, one-eyed!' Lalu rebuked him.

'To be sure, the earth is a blessing,' said Raghu. 'The fruits of earth are a blessing. My herd of goats brought the blessing of milk. But gold is a curse and silver is a curse, brothers!'

'If one had gold jewellery it can be pawned or mortgaged with the banya Seth,' said Madhu, 'If one has silver rupees they can be paid as rent to the landlord.'

'Yes, the moneylender and the landlord don't regard gold or silver as a curse,' said Lalu in the manner of the deliberate propagandist.

'Maharaj, cash is such a curse to these folk that the landlord thinks it best to take it away from them, so that it should not corrupt their souls,' said Sukhua. 'And even if he forgets to take it from them they do not forget to give it to him. Five years ago, the Nawab Sahib of Nasirabad wanted to collect some funds by paying a personal visit to all parts of his estate and levying nazar, as is the usual custom on these occasions. As he collected hundreds of rupees by a mere "showing" of himself, he decided he would make an annual tour every year. But the next year he happened to go to the hills for a rest cure and did not visit the villages, and the year after he forgot all about the tours. But such is the contempt for money of these fools that they still paid the nazrana to the Patwari of the village even though the Nawab never came!'

'And so ingrained is the custom of paying nazrana to the landlords that you put four annas at the feet of Kanwar Rampal Singh when you first came to see him!' Lalu mocked

at what everyone knew was One-eyed Sukhua's assumption of a meek humility merely to exact a favour.

One-eyed Sukhua cocked his blind eye to one side, smiled a knowing smile and said:

'Huzoor, on the oath of God, it was not done to deceive the Kanwar Sahib. But in Nasirabad it is the custom to pay nazrana to any official, before making any request. So the Patwari of our village has had a pukka brick house built, and he entertained two hundred guests for full five days on the marriage of his daughter. Some say that his wife goes to the house of the Nawab Sahib, and that his son is not his own, but that does not matter, for they are all seed of donkeys. Only it is the pukka house, and the land he has acquired!'

'Has anyone gained immortality by building a house?' said Raghu, disgusted with what he considered Sukhua's malicious back-biting.

'Maharaj, the flower-pots on the accountant's house talk to the sky, and he asks whether it is possible to gain immortality by building a pukka house!... All of them know the Patwari...'

'Throw your wheat on the ground and let the birds gather it,' Madhu quoted a proverb, rising from his common sense for once to poetry.

'To be sure, money is a curse!' said Raghu. 'Why, I know a chaprasi in Lucknow who died of having too much of it.... He won a "lottery" which they put in Calcutta and he got a lakh of rupees as a prize. And, to be sure, the evil spirit of money came and possessed him until he was stricken with a palsy, so that he first laughed, then wept and then died.'

'Ah, to be sure, brothers,' mocked Sukhua, 'it is like a leprosy which catches a whole race and makes it white-complexioned! Why, do you know that it is because this leprosy of gold has caught the Angrezi race that they are so white!'

Lalu couldn't help laughing at Sukhua's banter, but the other peasants seemed mortally offended.

'You are destined to go to jail if you persist in abusing the Sahibs,' said Bhupendra, coming back with his empty basket to fill up with mud again, though he seemed pale and dead beat. 'Then shall I be avenged on you for bringing ruin on me!'

'Go, salé, get to work!' bullied Sukhua as he sprang at Bhupendra with such force that the old man fell tottering on the ground. 'What ruin have I brought on you? I lost my own land, did I not?' And he fell on his cousin with a sudden fury, as if he were trying to show off to Lal Singh because he knew that the superior educated comrade preferred him to the other men.

'Oh, one-eyed fool!' Lalu shouted angrily at him as he sought to seperate the two cousins.

'May he die! The drunkard! The one-eyed!' Sobha, the wife of old Bhupendra, shrilled from where she was now dishing out rice gruel for the midday meal. And she ran cursing and swearing at Sukhua in the most foul language.

'He has no fear of God!' said Raghu.

'To be sure, he should not strike Bhupendra who is older than him!' said Madhu.

Meanwhile, Lalu separated Sukhua from Bhupendra and stood scowling and angry at the effrontery of the one-eyed scoundrel.

'Maharaj, they have another heart, these folk, whereas I have had the status of a chaprasi in Rae Barilli and only lost my land because of the jealously of Bhoori Singh . . .' Sukhua began to explain with the lofty airs of a self-styled foreman. 'I . . .'

'And I have another heart,' said Lalu, turning away from him.

And he began to walk away towards Rajgarh to report delivery of the timber for Kisan Nagar. He was full of anger as he swung along in the heat. They were impossible, these peasants. Old Bhupendra and Raghu would be doing well to be going on a pilgrimage to Benares. They did not even want to try to understand the causes of their trouble, not to speak of the goal and the struggle to achieve the goal. They merely thought that the world was full of sinister, horrible spirits like gold and silver. Madhu would perhaps work on the farm as he had solved his problems by rejecting religion. And Sukhua wanted his cockiness and self-assurance knocked out of him. . . . He had it in for the minor officials, probably

because he had been a minor official himself. . . . It all reminded him of his own village, Nandpur, and he felt impatient. He had begun to understand so much more of the reasons of their doom, that their piety and their fatalism made him feel hopeless. . . . Why, even One-eyed Sukhua, whose envy of other officials made him see glimpses of their iniquity, refused to blame the Sahibs, when, in the opinion of such learned people as the Count, the Angrezi Sarkar was entirely to blame for their misery!

He wiped the sweat off his face and muttered a curse to himself at his own impatience and the futility that sprang from it. Only how could he change them. . . . Why, ever since his arrival in Rajgarh, he had secretly felt that some of the tenants came to air their grievances to Kanwar Rampal Singh because they hoped to get charity from him, thinking that he, a landlord, could speak to their landlords, and not because they wanted to be organized into a peasant union to fight for the abolition of the landlord-tenant system. The Count had been directing their grievances into a channel of his own choosing. And he, Lalu, had been one of the accomplices in this plan, a paid agitator, a kind of drum-beater, to bamboozle the peasants into believing something they did not quite understand, something which even he himself did not understand fully. And he felt wretched, wondering how grievous a fault he had committed in taking these men on the abortive expedition to Allahabad, and whether he would be punished for this foolhardy stampeding of innocent, ignorant peasants into a campaign. Contemptuous of the fatalism of the peasants, he found himself reverting to the pessimism of his own ancestors . . . .

He shook himself and spat a frothy spittle to churn the bitterness out of his mouth. His throat felt parched and his skull, even under the shock of hair, seemed to be cracking with the heat. But he raced along.

'Comrade Sahib, comrade Lal Singh.' One-eyed Sukhua came running after him. 'Maharaj! Maharaj! . . .'

'What is it?' Lalu shouted, indignant that the man might be wanting to curry favour with him.

But the whole demeanour of Sukhua seemed to have changed. He waved his hands and moaned and wept in the manner he had shown when he first came to the Count.

'Maharaj, Bhupendra is dead. . . . He just fell dead there after I had pushed him,—he wouldn't get up! And when we lifted him, he was dead! Oh, Maharaj, oh, Maharaj, what curse against my fate has prospered in this ruin. . . . Oh, Maharaj!'

The summer sun had been sucking up the moisture from the earth till the sky was covered with a dull surface of slate-coloured clouds, ominous and oppressive and silent as if in mourning at the death of old Bhupendra.

Lalu thought again and again of the brevity and senselessness of life, as he walked into Rajgarh, of how the old man had been alive and working only a little while ago, and how a mere push had killed him. He didn't feel grief at the old man's death; for even though he tried he could not feel like beating his forehead. Only a sudden emptiness possessed him, as if he had been drained of all his blood. He chastised himself, for not feeling the right emotions, then excused himself, thinking he had probably been stunned dy the shock. But all his outward senses seemed to be sharp enough, even brittle like pin points, as he turned away, with ever-increasing irritation, from the dust of the footpath which connected the village to the metalled road, and hurried by the cottage hospital and the manure dumps. He felt he was being chased by all the putrefying smells, as if he were being stung by each dry stalk of bush and grass in the dhak forest which encroached upon the village.

A wisp of hot wind blew to his face from the corner of Humble Lane. Above the far-distant curve of the earth beyond the Ganges, he could see a whirlwind of sand arise, dark and menacing, and, through all the superstitions he had imbibed in his childhood, each grain of rolling sand seemed like a jinn or a bhut, the harbinger of a dust-storm.

Some crows flew over, caw-cawing, wheeled and dived for shelter in the niches of the Rajgarh temple. And, before

Lalu had entered the courtyard of the palace, the dust-storm had advanced over the cremation ground on the riverside, as if gathering all the spirits of the dead who were coming to welcome old Bhupendra to themselves, and the land was enveloped deep in sand and dust.

He stood for a moment, anxious for Maya, and dreading the avenging ghosts of *all his dead friends*, poised like a frightened insect in the shimmering air. And the sudden squall came over. A column of suffocating, hot dust and sand stung the exposed parts of his body, covering him till he could hardly breathe. He strained to breast the storm, the fine sand of whirlwinds drumming on his ears with weird howls and shrieks, filtering into his half-closed eyes till they were smarting, as if particles of chillies had got into them, singeing his hair and roasting his skin. All the landmarks before him seemed to be obliterated.

At that instant he heard the Count shouting for Ganga to shut the doors and he knew his direction. He waited between successive waves of the storm and reached the verandah of the Count's room, panting for breath and exhausted. But there the door was bolted. He knocked, but the knocking of the wind was louder. Luckily the dilatory Ganga had forgotten to close the bathroom door on the right of the verandah, and the inner sanctum could be approached through a connecting door.

'Say, friend, how goes it?' the Count said in his familiar figure of speech, and laughed as he walked up and down according to his usual habit.

'Old Bhupendra is dead,' Lalu answered abruptly as he went across the gloom and flung himself into a chair.

The Count turned round to look at Lalu's face, but Professor Verma, who sat draped in his eternal faded dressing-gown and was groping among the bits of paper spread on a small table before him, while he held two open reference books on his knees, remained absorbed in his job. . . . The Count resumed his tense, measured walk up and down the room.

Lal Singh began to wipe his face and neck and ears clear of the dust and sand with his handkerchief. He felt impatient with the leaders, especially with the detached Professor Verma,

who hadn't even turned a hair on a hearing the news of Bhupendra's death.

The learned man's reticence and proud assurance of superiority had lately irritated Lalu, the more becamuse he was aware of the Professor's growing contempt for the half-baked agitators around Rajgarh. Verma had been withdrawing into his shell since their return from Allahabad. And, from his inclination, first, in favour of Gandhi and, then, in favour of Kanwar Birpal Singh, and his resumption of his research on the comprehensive book on India which he had been writing for some years, it was evident that he was out of sympathy with the campaign. The only moment, however, during which Lalu had ever seen the Professor's eyes light up was when Verma had been giving the Count an exposition of the plan of his book. . . . But, from all that he had told the Count, it had seemed that to the Professor, the peasants, the land, the landlords, the Sarkar, the estates and the workers in the city mills were mere words, words, words, hieroglyphs which he had compiled from other books and which had lain clustered like various species of ants, some large and some small, on bits of paper in his heavy leather portfolio since the war. The duty of the wise man, who carried the burdens of civilization on his shoulders, seemed, from some of the hints which the Professor had dropped during the exchanges with the Count, to be to promote Revolution by amassing a solid indictment of British rule in India, a book, the clear ideas of which would be the chief weapon in the war of Indian independence. For they would be mainly British ideas quoted at the British in such a way as to show the injustice and unfairness of their handling of India, so that the rulers would become ashamed of themselves and quit the country at once. The French philosophers of the eighteenth century, he said, had undermined the *ancien régime* by the power of ideas. The Indian philosophers could, without resort to violence or the brute force of the masses, uproot the Angrezi Sarkar from India. This colossal dynamo of Revolution had not yet progressed beyond the collection of notes, though not even all the notes for all the chapters had been put together. But a synopsis of the

book had already been submitted to a Berlin publisher, and Professor Verma waited as eagerly for the foreign mail to bring news of its acceptance as Kanwar Rampal Singh waited for letters from his sweetheart. Lately, since his visit to Allahabad, he had gained some hope of possible patronage from the Congress, and that was probably why he was so hard at work as even to ignore the report of Bhupendra's death, but he wore his integrity behind such an unassailable mask of balanced uprightness and idealism that no vulgar ignoramus like Lalu could accuse him of lack of sympathy.

'Did you hear the news, Verma Sahib?' the Count almost shouted at the professor.

'Oh yes,' Verma said. Then he sighed and threw his head back.

He had succeeded in catching most of his papers before they flew with the inrush of the wind, but he was not quite sure. He put his reference books on the pile and got up to take another cigarette from the box of Abdullas on the sideboard.

Outside, the squall blew as though it had arisen from hundreds of miles away. Beginning in angry spurts from somewhere beyond the Vindhyachal Mountains, it seemed to have come rumbling across the deserts of Rajputana, gathering sound and force from each cremation ground, till it had reached Kisan Nagar, where old Bhupendra lay dead. . . .

'How did it happen?' the Count asked.

'His end had probably come,' said Lalu tiredly. And then he told them how it had all happened.

They all remained silent after Lalu had spoken. Then Professor Verma said in a quiet cynical tone:

'These peasants are the limit! What is the use of doing propaganda among them, if they murder each other!'

Lalu, had himself felt impatient with the peasants, but Professor Verma seemed to be so cold that he could not help cursing him under his breath.

'You seem to be accepting Tiwari Sahib's lordly heresy!' said the Count. 'The peasants are low, stupid and crude. To appeal to them for unity is only to bring about violence! . . . As if a revolution of ideas will inevitably bring about a revolu-

tion in practice! . . . Wah wah, Verma Sahib! The shades of Hegel! Surely that one-eyed did not mean to kill old Bhupendra!'

'Whether he meant to kill Bhupendra or not,' said Professor Verma, 'we ought to hand him over to the police, until he is cleared of the charge of manslaughter. Otherwise there will be complications, not only for you but for your brother Kanwar Birpal Singh.'

'From what Lal Singh says it seems to have been an accident,' said the Count angrily, and he coughed with the dust which was stealing into his throat as he spoke. 'Besides, let the police do what it can. I don't believe in the sort of uprightness which will deliver us into their power.'

'If we resort to the unscrupulous methods of the police to further our cause,' said Verma, 'then we can never show an example of truth and honesty to the peasants. After all, it is your own feeling of the immorality, the injustice and unfairness of the landlord's treatment of the tenants that has brought you to the side of the peasants. And there can never be a new and better world if you achieve it by immoral means.'

'But, my dear sir,' the Count shouted hoarsely from across the room, 'our present morality has nothing to do with the Revolution! It not only considers the very idea of an attempted change of the *status quo* as wicked, but it fines and imprisons a *poor man for stealing a bagful of guavas from Kanwar Birpal* Singh's garden, whereas it leaves Kanwar Birpal Singh free to levy and taxes he likes. Your moral teaching will not alone be sufficient to change this social order based on the greed of a few, but the recognition by all that the present relations between landlord and tenant are obsolete. . . . I grant you that our own itch to bring about this change may be due to our feeling of moral indignation, but morality has nothing much to do with the social question, except as a fellow-traveller, —and an embarrassing fellow-traveller it is with all its finicky scruples. A bloody revolution seems to be a great deal more moral than the crimes of our present decaying society.'

And, making a wry face, he spat the dust out of his mouth

into a spittoon, as if he were ridding himself of the putrid taste of the crimes of the present society.

Lalu's attention was riveted on the tense, stooping figure of Kanwar Rampal Singh and he forgot the howling of the storm outside. He was torn by the confusion in his own mind. He had felt guilty about mouthing slogans and tackling the watchman, Bhoori Singh, about Gandhiji and a hundred different things. And yet he had wanted to help the peasants. True, he felt a certain sense of glory in leading the men. But he was aware of his vanities and, essentially, he felt for the men. Stupid, insensate and cruel, concerned about their own little plots of land, ignorant of the forces which oppressed them, and superstitiously invoking the gods, bounded on every side by fear, tottering and careworn and almost half-dead, they toiled and persevered and followed where their leaders led them. For that very reason he wanted to be worthy of them and not to betray them. There was no doubt about the desirability of the Revolution they were fighting for. But were they really employing the best means to achieve it. . . . What was the destiny of man without a sense of right or wrong? Throughout his life he himself had struggled to perfect himself, if not according to the pietistic ideas of his father who told the beads of a rosary every minute of the day, or like his brother Dayal Singh who quoted the words of Guru Nanak, but according to his own ideas of well-being and those which he had found good in the teaching of the Church Mission High School at Sherkot. He had been in revolt against the limitations of his own nature as well as against the prejudices of religion in Nandpur, and he had sought to perfect himself in the face of evil though he had suffered. He had struggled, and always would go on struggling to remove his own ignorance and all the defects in his own nature. And, since self-perfection was not enough, he would try to cleanse the blurred minds of all the peasants, to open their eyes to the iniquities which were practised on them. He had been unconsciously practising one ideal of his brother Dayal Singh's outworn code,—to serve others. But was he sure in his devotion? For only thus could he hope to control his own destiny and help to bring about a

better world. He was not sure. . . . The Count had said that the morality of the present was no morality, and it was true that the circumstances under which the peasants lived, the immoral laws according to which they were held to be thieves if they defaulted rent payment while the landlord was free to levy nazrana, made the present society evil, and the task of upsetting it a sacred duty. . . . Only he feared that he was going into the dark night for a future where he might lose the way, the right path.

'But surely,' he began, turning to the Count.

'I know what you want,' said Kanwar Rampal Singh with a flourish of his hand. 'Perhaps I put it rather awkwardly. I know you are worried about the role of virtue in my new heaven. Perhaps I am too angry with my own class. I know how horrible I must sound blaming the landlords for all their delinquencies and completely ignoring the faults of the peasants . . . But it is a question of two moralities, as it is a question of the two different worlds we live in, the world of this palace, allied to the Angrezi Sarkar and its morality, and the world of men who live in those huts out there, and the morality which they might create if they had a chance. Have you ever seen how they hang by each other on their marriage, birth and death ceremonies, how they would lay their turbans at the feet of any member of their brotherhood with whom they may have quarrelled, to reconcile him before partaking of a feast on an auspicious occasion. . . . All that may look ridiculous and sentimental to us, but it shows the tenderness that exists between them. . . .'

'That One-eyed Sukhua came running after me to tell me how he had killed Bhupendra, and he wept bitterly,' Lalu said naïvely, finding confirmation for his thoughts in the Count's words.

'They are dirty, they are crude, they are ignorant,' said the Count, 'they are all that from the point of view of our own assured greatness. . . . But once we have abolished the notion of our superiority, we shall begin to see that they are human beings; once we have broken the barriers that subsist between them, there will arise a new morality among them, a new sense of right and wrong.'

The full blast of the dust storm seemed to have passed, and the metallic glare of the merciless sun shimmered through the chinks of the doors. All three of them were perspiring in the suffocation of the closed doors and looked away from each other, as if the heat which the argument had created between them prevented them from even expressing the wish for a little air.

'Much as I hope that murder will only be manslaughter in the new society,' said Professor Verma with a dry irony, 'I do hope that manslaughter will not go unpunished in this. . . . Otherwise the devil will be complete master of the situation.'

'Let us go and find out if this particular manslaughter was not really an accident,' commanded the Count, inured to mastery, in spite of his attempts at self-immolation. 'Then we shall have no need to talk in abstractions.'

But it was difficult enough to persuade Professor Verma to come and eat the fresh air at the best of times. To-day, there had been a dust storm and an argument, and his proud little bespectacled face was covered with a nervous grin as he waved his head to signify negation, took another cigarette to help himself to concentrate his thoughts on his *magnum opus*, perfunctorily brushed his faded dressing-grown to shake off the dust, sighed and settled down to his papers.

A wire from Jawaharlal Nehru arrived the next day that he would be coming by the afternoon train, and the doom that had come over Rajgarh, through Bhupendra's death, lifted in anticipation of Panditji's visit.

The rumour of the expected arrival spread from shop to shop and house to house. And, apart from the evicted tenants at Kisan Nagar, even the gentry of the estate, the money-lenders, the cloth merchants, the doctor of the cottage hospital, the post-master, the high priest of the temple, all trailed out to the railway station to welcome the great young leader.

Seldom, since the marriage party of Kanwar Birpal Singh had boarded a special train for Jaipur, had this wayside station in the wilds seen such a gathering of rich and poor, seldom had Government officials thrown off all the fear of the Sarkar and

gathered together with the ordinary people in these parts to greet a national leader. Even the station-master held a garland of flowers in his left arm, while he carried his red and green flag rolled up in his right hand.

The train was half an hour late as usual on the branch line and the gentry kept leaning over the edge of the platform, not so much out of impatience, since everyone is accustomed in India to the lateness of trains, but to show the lower orders that they could see if the green signal had dropped and the smoke of the engine was in sight, and most of them took this opportunity of shooting the copious gore of the betel leaves they chewed on to the rails.

The afternoon sun had lost none of its noon-time grandeur and ferocity and made everyone impatient for Jawaharlal Nehru, except that the grasshoppers chirped leisurely about and the sweating gentry kept up a chorus of puerile talk.

'Panditji is a friend of the Prince of Wales,' said Seth Wal Chand, the cloth merchant. 'I hear they were at the same college and played golf together.'

'Yes, it is a great sacrifice, indeed, for him to give up all his fine clothes and to wear homespuns,' said Mr. Sastri, the post-master.

'But the sacrifices of his father, Pandit Motilal, are greater,' said Kanwar Tejpal Singh, an imposing old uncle of Birpal and Rampal who had come in his robes of honour and with his white moustachios dyed black for the occasion. 'His fee for a case in the High Court used to be two lakhs of rupees, and only Rajas and Maharajas could brief him. Now I hear he is giving up his practice.'

'Sahib, he used to send his clothes to be laundered in Paris,' said Seth Wal Chand, trying to impress the feeble, bespectacled Doctor Badri Nath of the Cottage Hospital.

'And if they hadn't refused him admission to that English Club in Allahabad, Pandit Motilal would never have turned against the Sarkar,' sighed the doctor as he adjusted his necktie into position over his sweat-covered shirt.

'Great father, great son,' said Seth Wal Chand. 'I only hope he will accept my invitation to come and have a meal with us.'

'Go, salé bourgeois!' Gupta muttered under his breath, and drifted away with Ram Din.

'Seth Sahib,' shouted the Count, to prick the bubble, 'you don't realize that Jawaharlal is one of us, a socialist.'

'Aji, Kanwar Sahib, you can say what you like,' replied Seth Wal Chand. 'All of you young folk are to us like our own children who must play their pranks.'

'I would very much like a rich godfather,' Lalu said from where he stood by Sukhua, Raghu, Madhu and the peasants.

At this instant there was a stirring in the distance, and, from far away, as if emanating from the forest, came puffs of smoke, and a rumbling which grew louder and louder till, trailing smoke, whistling, shrieking and bellowing, the 'Rajgarh Express,' as the Count jocularly called the slow afternoon train, came to rest by the platform.

Panditji's head showed up at the window of a third-class compartment, a clear cut, shy smiling image of ivory.

'Bolo Pandit Jawaharlal ki jai!' Ram Din the slogan shouter yelled.

And the evicted tenants, the gentry, the officials, even the other passengers travelling with Jawaharlal, echoed the call.... And, in the flash of a moment, all the populace on the platform ran towards the compartment in which the leader had been sighted, the gentry struggling to get ahead of the rabble, and bringing out garlands of marigold and motia from wet towels to put round Panditji's neck, so that even stalwarts like Lalu were left behind.

'Bolo Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru ki jai!' Lal Singh gave a call, even as he held up the garlands he was to put round Panditji's neck on behalf of the evicted tenants, and beckoned the men to follow.

The men repeated the call but, frightened by the bluff of the eager rich to claim the leader to themselves, advanced gingerly.

Panditji seemed to have noticed the cross-currents at a glance. And he cut through the stampede of the exalted up to Lal Singh and the peasants, and had himself garlanded by them first. Then, with an unmistakable sense of humour, he turned

to the station-master with joined hands and accepted the official's tribute even as he yielded up his ticket. At last came the turn of Seth Wal Chand and the gentry, who fairly smothered him with flowers and speeches and invitations to meals and handshakes of the most cordial kind, as if they had known Panditji since he was a babe in arms.

But the loud peasant calls of 'Jawaharlal ki jai,' grew louder as the crowd seemed to form itself into a loose procession behind the slight, gracious figure in a simple homespun tunic and dhoti and advanced down the platform. The calls of 'Long live Jawaharlal' swelled to a crescendo as the train departed, and all the genteel voices which had been whispering into Panditji's ears lapsed. And, before they could reclaim the leader's attention, he was whisked across the siding into the estate Daimler which Kanwar Birpal Singh, temporarily friendly to his elder brother, had lent for the occasion.

Like most All-India leaders, Panditji was a very busy person and could, he declared, only stay for a few days. And, being the scion of a rich, exalted city family, brought up in the luxury of a resplendent home and educated in schools and colleges in England, he wished, since he was going to take an interest in the peasantry, to go about the country and acquaint himself at first hand with the conditions of the afflicted.

The Count, therefore, planned the itinerary of a tour among the villages for him. This was to end up with a mass meeting to be held outside the new Kisan Sabha headquarters, which, incidentally, Panditji was to open formally on that occasion.

Lalu only had a few brief glimpses of this new, exalted guest before he went off with the Count, Professor Verma and Ram Din on his tour. But these previews were enough to make him wish he had been free from the arrangements at Kisan Nagar to go with the visitor. For, unlike Srijut Ladli Parshad Tiwari, who had come to Rajgarh before the march to Allahabad, and really not to be mentioned in the same breath as that portentous, lawyer politician, Panditji was human. . . . This alone would have been enough to recommend him as a very paragon of virtue among the tribe of city politicians, generally bloated

caricatures of themselves, whose exaggerated love of country was invariably in strict ratio to the proportion of profit in name, fame and wealth which they hoped to gain from the national struggle for themselves, and whose glib phrases couched in stentorian accents, only hid the insensitiveness of tenth-rate imitations of English public figures behind the bluff of a just and righteous enough cause. But, apart from his humanity, his casual, free, easy, humorous friendliness, there was obvious in him a sincerity, a breadth of understanding, and the sensitiveness and awkwardness of an intellectual. He seemed to have strayed into a calling which he would never have chosen, if it had not been a humiliation for him to see a suffering which he did not share, who had become addicted to politics, because in India there was no life for any self-respecting individual without politics, who seemed, nevertheless, to be curiously non-national, as though the comprehensiveness of his thought had given him a cosmopolitan vision. To some extent, the fair-complexioned, fine-featured, elegant presence of Panditji made him look like a European, but this first impression was superficial and illusory, and in no sense freed him from nationality as some of the fair-complexioned Indians, like many Parsis and Eurasians, have tended to think themselves freed as a cover for the benefit they derived from association with the white Sahibs. The mild gestures of his supple, shapely hands, his deep sunken eyes and his high brow were too obviously the product of an Indian heredity. But there was a trace of that non-attachment or renunciation in his manner, which Lalu had seen even more emphasized in Comrade Sarshar, which freed him and made him seem an obvious internationalist. . . .

Lalu applied himself more eagerly to the task of getting the construction finally finished and whitewashed in anticipation of the opening ceremony, and he waited anxiously to confirm the favourable view he had formed of the young All-Indian leader. Somehow, in spite of the guilt he felt about the misfortunes of the Kisan movement through the deaths of Nandu and old Bhupendra, he was filled with an inner buoyancy and exaltation such as he had not felt since his arrival in Rajgarh; as if the mere thrill of contact with a youthful hero had

brought the broken parts of him together, reintegrated him with fresh hopes. That greater and more enlightened people than himself, who were honoured by every one, should also be devoted to the cause which he espoused, gave him faith. Even Maya had been impressed with the greatness of Panditji, or rather with his handsomeness, as she came with the other women of the palace to have a 'darshan' of him. And she was now inclined to believe that her husband could not be a mere hooligan in his addiction to the company of the lower orders. The lower orders themselves were filled with a new kind of strength. They were all absorbed in the excitement of work and talk as they hurried on with the completion of the barn at Kisan Nagar, breezy, joyous, as if they were making a new world, joking, lending each other a hand, poking fun at the slowness of one of them, at the ridiculous agility of another, at the sweat on the bodies of the young, and at the falling loin cloths of the old. They were possessed by the new buoyancy which the visit of Jawaharlal to these parts had put into everyone's heart, inspired into a burst of furious activity, the rhythm of a new collective will which reached out to the great leader.

On the afternoon of the third day after their departure on the peasant tour, Panditji and the party came back to Rajgarh.

Ram Din came over to Kisan Nagar and told Lalu to hasten work on the barn and to have it in readiness for the opening ceremony early in the afternoon. Panditji, he said, was in a hurry to get back to Allahabad, having already been delayed owing to the foul play of the police, who had punctured the tyres of the car when they had left it unattended in a village near Nanakpur. Ram Din was full of the trip, even as he was dusty and hot from the long marches into the outlying parts of Rajgarh and the neighbouring estates, for they had had to go on foot where the Ford car of Kanwar Rampal Singh could not penetrate, and through the enforced journey to Partabgarh which he, Ram Din, had had to make to get a mechanic after the tyres had been punctured. Anyhow, he said, Panditji had been deeply impressed by the hospitality and the affection he had received from the peasantry, of whom his

earlier experience had been limited to distant views of the swarms that came to bathe in the Ganges beyond his father's big house in Allahabad. Also Panditji, like all city folk, was somewhat naively pleased, Ram Din said, at his own physical achievement in coming through the baptism of fire and heat of the summer sun, with no more damage than a rich dark-brown tan.

As the rumour that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was to speak at a big peasant meeting at Kisan Nagar had spread throughout the countryside, hundreds of kisans came surging from all directions that morning, hours in advance of the meeting, sun-burnt and sweating, with thick layers of dust on their feet, with roasted gram in small knots tied to their staves, hunger in their bellies, but with gleams of hope in their eyes. . . .

Lal Singh was thrilled almost to breaking-point as he went to the palace to fetch the exalted for the meeting, immediately after the midday meal.

Unfortunately for him, however, he found that Panditji had already left that afternoon in response to a telegram which summoned him to urgent business in Allahabad. . . .

The bottom seemed to have been knocked out of Lalu's universe at this sudden blow to all his plans. And he sat silently in the Count's room, full of a fury against Congress Leaders, which seemed to become a resentment against the whole world.

But Ram Din had already brought a yekka to take the comrades to Kisan Nagar for the opening ceremony.

'Say, friend, how goes it?' the Count said, apparently undisturbed by Panditji's sudden departure, when Ram Din awoke him from his siesta.

No one spoke for some time, and the Count fell to blowing his nose and spitting into the spittoon, for the dust of the tour had blocked the cavity in his nose, where the growth of bone wanted cauterizing. From the drawn expression on his face he seemed to be in a torment.

'Don't look so sad, comrades,' he mocked, however. 'It makes me so happy to see you like that!' And he laughed a deliberate laugh even as he turned to Ram Din and said: 'Go

and fetch the doctor, brother, so that he can give me an injection.'

'But I am here, Kanwar Sahib,' said Doctor Badri Nath from where he sat humbly on the floor by Gupta and Lal Singh, poring over one of the tomes in Professor Verma's library, while that worthy was literally sweating over the *magnum opus* which was to reveal the true state of India to the world.

'I have made a somewhat close study of these wearers of Khadi,' the Count began, as he bared his arm to the doctor, who got busy with his syringes and serums, '"the homespun fellows." And I have come to the conclusion that they are completely bogus and put on the homespun to hide a tremendous inferiority complex. . . .'

'But you wear homespuns, too,' said Lalu. 'And so do we.'

'But the homespun fellows can be divided into two kinds,' the Count continued. 'There are the masses who wear homespuns, because they can't afford any other cloth, and who deserve freedom because they are exposed to all the ill winds that blow, and there are the leaders who manage somehow to remain immune from the effects of their environment and have to fake the emotions of hunger in order to establish their solidarity with the people. It is this last kind of spurious homespun of whom I have been making a profound study. . . .'

'Your self-deprecation may be the expression of the most inordinate vanity,' said Professor Verma, as though he felt the Count's remarks about spurious homespuns to be a personal insult.

As I said to you the other day, brother,' the Count said, 'we. . . .'

'Now, Kanwar Sahib, please don't talk for a moment,' said the doctor, ready to push the needle into the Count's shoulder. 'Otherwise you will only say I am a bad Babu Doctor.'

'Salé, you are a bad doctor, anyhow,' said Gupta.

'Chup, salé!' shouted Ram Din, striking Gupta a 'thappar' on the head.

'As I have told you,' said the Count, swallowing the sharp pain, 'we belong to two different worlds. Now I insist that we belong to two different races: The leaders in homespun and

the masses in homespun. The leaders in homespun go round and collect glory and proclaim the most wonderful ideals, while the gullible masses in homespun accept these principles unsuspectingly and exalt the leaders and lift them on their shoulders. . . . It is the recognition of this which makes men like Lal Singh into revolutionaries and fellows like me into gasbags! . . .'

'Those masses in homespun will be waiting, Kanwar Sahib,' said Lalu, seeing that the Count was proceeding in a leisurely way about his toilet. He knew that the Count had sensed his disappointment and was being sympathetic.

'Oh, I could get very heated about the spurious homespun fellows,' Rampal persisted in his garrulous self-exposition. And then he lifted Professor Verma from his chair with a laugh and shook him, shouting, 'Wake up, Wisdom.' And, to the amusement of everyone, he ran out, took the reins of the skinny horse, which stood adjusted to the bamboo cart, in his hand and, ascending the broad end of the shaft, began to call out for passengers in the familiar raucous manner of the yekka drivers.

At this Lalu could not restrain himself from joining in the fun and began to make a pretence of haggling in the manner of the would-be passenger on a carriage stand.

Even Professor Verma stepped forward and carried the joke further, by imitating the fluency of the city Babu insulted at the rudeness of the driver.

Just then, choosing his time, Ram Din strolled up, acting *the relentless policeman who bundled them on to the carriage,* in order to clear the obstructions in the way of other traffic, jumped on to the mudguard himself to get a free ride, and despatched the horse on its way with a few cruel strokes of the whip.

The humble Babu Doctor simulated the moaning accent of the passenger who had been left behind. Gupta added the final touch to this farce by falling on all fours and yelping like a dog. The skinny horse cantered along the courtyard, at a pace which would have been the sure death of him, had not the Count pulled up by the narrow passageway leading to the bazaar. Then he led him on to a cart track, the remnants

of the highway, which skirted the edge of the dhak forest beyond the sour odours of the peasant huts towards Kisan Nagar where it cut the new metalled road and proceeded to Nanakpur.

The Count kept up a running commentary on Revolution and Revolutionaries, until he began to find difficulties in negotiating his way across the highway, which was completely devoid of such modern conveniences as he had got used to in Europe,—signposts. Not only could he not turn his head back to make speeches here, for lack of signposts, but he could hardly take his eyes off the old road. For, apart from short stretches of dust, there was no highway but a narrow track, overgrown with tall grasses, cactus and wild bush, unbroken, and stretching regularly enough in its serpentine way, but difficult.

'A dustway is pleasant enough, comrades, to travel on. Ah, at least, it recalls pleasant memories of ancient days and fills one with pride of our glorious past . . .' the Count resumed his commentary.

There was a sudden bump as the left wheel fell into a rut and then emerged, shaking everyone into shouts of nervous laughter.

'This particular highway,' continued the irrepressible Count, 'was built by King Chandra Gupta, four hundred years before Christ . . .'

'One of my ancestors,' said Gupta.

'Go, salé, banya!' the Count shouted him down. 'And each particle of its dust has become sacred through the treading on it of hundreds of noblemen, warriors, officials of high rank, gods, goddesses and the spirits which haunt these parts. Believe it or not, but my mother always said that the spirits of the past can be seen holding dances here, especially during the parts of the month when there is a full moon, and then each particle of dust shines like a star. And when it rains—wah, what to say! The smell of the earth is sweet and lush to the soul and fills one with such content that one could sleep for centuries, and wake up to find oneself a spirit of the other world. . . . And when there is a dust storm,—why then all the jinns and the bhuts of

the countryside come to hold a conference here with other spirits of the jungle. . . .'

'Whatever happens here during full moon nights in the rainy season or in a duststorm,' said Lalu surily, 'it is the longest way to choose, when you are on the way to a meeting.'

'And, during daytime, the dust absorbs the heat and spreads a drowsy stupor in the eyes of the tired peasant, while the deep ruts in its bends enable the beast to steer the carts to its destination, unguided by the whip, the squeaking music of the wheels lulls the drivers to sleep with pleasant dreams, till he wakes up to find that the stages have slipped away . . . .'

'Oh, dusty highway!' mocked Gupta in a singsong imitation of the Count's voice, 'boon to the oppressed, long may you live, for your pits and your ruts show such sublime contempt for the bums of the bourgeoisie!'

It was neither the thorns nor the dust nor the ruts on the highway, however, that delayed these revolutionaries, but a crowd which seemed to be converging and falling away from some object on the cross-roads where the track met the main road.

At first they thought that some peasant, who was going along to the meeting, had fainted. But then a uniformed peon could be seen beating a man who lay stubbornly in the ditch, while a group of peasants hung around, supplicating and appealing to the official to stop.

'Oh, stop that crow pecking on the ox's wounds!' the Count said.

Lal Singh jumped the small ditch between the road and the track and hastened towards the men who were converging and falling away from one of them, clutching, tearing and clawing in violent spurts, shrieking shrill abuse, as if they were wrenched in agonies of fear and passion . . .

As he raced up to the spot, some of the men fell away and glanced up at him with black, hot faces, streamed with sweat, while the others heaved the man with a peon's cloth belt round his waist, who now lay pounding and gnawing at a hefty young labourer.

'Why this wrestling in the middle of the burning road?' Lalu asked.

The men hung their heads down and stood away clamouring in confused, shrill accents to secure the labourer's release, while the chaprasi was still getting at his victim with a dæmonic malevolence, as he spat the dust that came into his mouth and cried: 'May I rape your mother, I'll give you the reward of disobedience. . . . May I . . ."

Lala rushed at the chaprasi and sought to tear him away, but the peon seemed to have become a maleficent beast, as the blood dripped from the scratches on his victim's face, among the tangles of small trees and bushes.

At that instant Ram Din came up and shouted:

'Oh, animals, beasts, leave go!'

'That devil has got the blood lust!' Lalu said. 'Come, get him away.'

They both arrested the chaprasi's arms and sundered him with a jerky violence which made the peon aware of their presence.

The felled man got up and, without waiting to brush the dust off his black hair, or to wipe the blood off his face, ran towards the leaders who had descended from the yekka and were walking towards the scene.

'They can take their money back, Maharaj! I don't want it! Look how he has beaten me!' he wailed as he gesticulated in an abandon of hatred and self-pity.

'Brother-in-law! Illegally begotten! Keep quiet and lift the load or I shall have you flogged by the police!' shouted the chaprasi. And he ran after the man and tried to drag him back by the scruff of the neck, while some of the men, who had followed, fell away through sheer fear of the official's anger.

'He can kill me, Huzoor, but I don't even want to be a member of the bank!' the man said as he bent down and touched Verma Sahib's feet, seeking sanctuary in the leader's legs.

'You will carry the load!' the chaprasi said, as he ventured to raise him.

'Have you gone mad, buffoon of a uniform?' the Count said 'Leave him!'

But the chaprasi's pride had been touched to the quick by the stranger's rebuke and he persisted with a hard stubbornness.

Aching with impatience through disappointment and delay, Lalu shot ahead and struck the chaprasi a resounding slap on the head. He had no doubt that the stupid peon would not give way without drastic pressure, his senses had grasped that evil comes openly and slips past the hesitant.

'Get away, be a man, and don't hit that creature if he can't defend himself!' he said.

'You dare not strike a Sarkari servant!' whined the peon. 'Wait till I get the police. . . .'

'Dare I not?' Lalu raved, bloody-eyed, though inwardly he was still ashamed of himself for taking the law into his hand.

'He is insolent, Huzoor,' said the victim. And then he turned to the chaprasi: 'Don't you know that the Kanwar Sahib of Rajgarh is there?'

The chaprasi remained silent, as he churned the froth in his mouth and brushed the dust off his clothes. But the peasants joined hands to the Count and began to speak all at once in a babble of dialect about the injustice that the peon had done the victim.

'One at a time!' the Count said.

'Maharaj, this chaprasi be doing Zoolam!' a young man said.

'What kind of cruelty?!' Ram Din coaxed in dialect.

The young man seemed to dry up at this, while some others began again, all together.

'Maharaj! Maharaj! They be brigands, these officers of state! They be. . .'

'One at a time, I have told you!' the Count said.

But the rebuke seemed to silence them.

'Brothers, let one of you speak,' said Lalu. And he turned to the victim convinced by the scratches on the man's face that he would speak the truth: 'Aré you, stand up and speak for yourself.'

'Maharaj,' the man said in a hollow, affecting voice. 'The Manager Sahib of Nanakpur told this chaprasi to order me to carry the luggage of the Sub-Inspector of the Co-operative Society to another village. I had to go and look for my camel in the bush and I knew I would lose my day's work on the land. So I refused. Whereupon he ordered me to carry the luggage and abused my mother into the bargain. He can abuse me, but not my mother! . . . And I will not obey his orders. I am a member of the Co-operative Bank and that is why I am always asked to carry the loads of the afsars of the Bank. . . .'

'Huzoor, no officer pays anyone for carrying luggage,' put in one of the men.

'He lies,' said the chaprasi. 'Some officers pay. . . . The Inspector Sahib gives the coolies food expenses.'

'I know exactly how much they pay them!' said the Count. 'Forced labour is state work!'

'Huzoor, they didn't even give a little rice gruel when I was taken fifty miles, twice before,' said the victim, now bubbling with energy. 'No question of giving. They take away eggs, milk, butter, fowls and grain from us for their own use.'

'The Honourable the Co-operative Society!' commented the Count.

'We must hurry,' said Professor Verma, looking at his wristwatch.

All this time he had seemed to be embarrassed by the horrible and grotesque realities of the sunburnt dusty byways of the rough countryside, shaken and numbed, for he had never felt, though he had often imagined, the decomposition of these feudal wastes, and was, therefore, anxious to get away from the scene.

'Round them up and bring them to the meeting, Ram Din,' the Count said.

'I have orders to have that luggage transported to the next village,' said the chaprasi. 'The Inspector Sahib will be waiting for his bedding.'

'Now the orders are revised,' said the Count. 'You can lift

the luggage on to your own back. Come on, all of you, and leave him to it.'

There was a dense crowd of peasants squatting outside the new Kisan Sabha Headquarters, under the shade of the banyan tree and beyond it in the torrid glare of the sun, up to the ditch which separated the compound from the roads. Some were still struggling up from the fields, with little bundles suspended from the ends of bamboo sticks, a ridiculous agility in their flat feet.

Lalu could see nothing but black, sunburnt faces, whites of uplifted eyes and the short round necks of the men above their grimy white tunics, as he got on to the platform which he and One-eyed Sukhua had prepared in the shadow of the new barn, ready with white sheet and a cow-tailed cushion for the leaders to sit on. He nervously picked up some garlands of marigold flowers and stood putting them round the necks of each of the leaders as they stepped on to the dais. He wanted the meeting to be a success, but the incidents of the day seemed to have unsettled him. The peasants did not rise to great them, though flutters of excitement went down the throng at the recognition of Kanwar Rampal Singh and Professor Verma. But this was not enough for Lal Singh, who had always thought the peasants of this part of the country subdued, after the enthusiasm he had witnessed at the meeting at Nandpur on his return. He felt that if he could work himself from his disconsolate sadness into a belief in action he would still be able to save the situation.

'"Bolo Kanwar Rampal Singh ki jai!"' he called.

The peasants took up the call, more enthusiastically than they had answered the first calls at the meeting on the sun-eclipse festival, as if they were emerging from the safety of their feebleness to dare and assert their strength.

'But where is Panditji?' they all seemed to be asking as they explored the faces on the dais.

'Brothers,' Lalu said with an apologetic smile. 'Panditji has had to go back to Allahabad on urgent business, but the

meetting will be held under the Presidentship of Kanwar Rampal Singh.

The peasants looked on emptily, as if they could not understand why Panditji had gone, and they whispered to each other.

The smell of marigold garlands mixed with the sweat of men's bodies, with the rich aroma of the recently watered earth and with the dusty, arid smell of drying foliage strewn about the fields.

Lalu felt disturbed in spite of himself, as if the inner self in him was reproaching him for some crime he had committed. And he sensed the disappointment of the crowd at the non-appearance of Panditji. . . . There was a curious lull for a moment and he became aware of a barrier, a gap between himself, who was so concerned that this meeting should be a success, and the people before him, who seemed still and docile. Hitherto, he had checked himself continuously from giving way to despair if the crowd looked apathetic: he had tried to remember that their docility was the result of their hopelessness. . . . But he now felt that if he didn't energize them, he would himself be in a panic. Ashamed of his loud-mouthedness, but deliberately histrionic and downright, he called again:

'Bolo Verma Sahib ki jai!'

The crowd responded with a louder echo than before. Apparently, the resistances which kept them at a safe, dead level had broken down through the noisy calls, and through the mere babbling of so many voices.

Even Professor Verma was enthused, so that lifted his voice and called out in a broken, husky little squeak:

'"Bolo Kisan Sabha ki jai!"'

Lalu was afraid that the Professor's small voice would excite ridicule, but the peasants took up the call with an enthusiasm which was surprising since not many of them had yet been told what the Kisan Sabha was. Presumably, stories of the leader's doings had been travelling round the countryside and the peasants had surmised vaguely that these men on the dais, who to them were the Kisan Sabha, were willing to listen to their grievances.

'The rowdy voices of One-eyed Sukhua and the other evicted tenants from Nasirabad, and the grudge of the small group by the cross-roads against the chaprasi, added shrill discordant notes of passion to the call.

After a few hurried whispers among the leaders on the dais, the Count got up and stood in his familiar manner, his head hunched between the shoulders, his arms looking awkwardly for somewhere to put themselves, a smile on his lips which was catching.

'Brothers and comrades!' he began. 'I am glad to see your faces, because the last time I spoke to you on the banks of the Ganges at Rajgarh, some of you showed me your backs.'

The contagious smile on the Count's face was the harbinger of the peasants' flattering laughter. But they soon subsided. So he continued:

'But, of course, you may have come to see the wonder sight, Pandit Jawaharlal. Now, as Comrade Lal Singh told you, Panditji has left. . . . But we have with us One-eyed Sukhua, the hero of Nasirabad. . . .'

One-eyed Sukhua seemed to have become the acknowledged funny man of these parts from the laughter that now broke out.

'Also, we have a victim of the Co-operative Bank,' said the Count.

There were grunts and whispers, for the Co-op was a legendary tyrant.

'And we have other comrades, our learned Verma Sahib, who has always done his wheat-farming with a pen and hopes to spread the seed of revolt among you with his hieroglyphs. . . .'

But now everything he said provoked laughter. So much so that he had to make an appeal for silence. And then he proceeded to announce that the meeting had been called for the opening ceremony of the new building, and announced the order of speakers. Since Panditji, who was to perform the opening ceremony, was not present, the Count announced that Verma Sahib would officiate.

There was a deep stirring when Professor Verma took off the garlands of flowers from his neck, put them aside and arose, pallid and tense under the sunlight which now played

on the tree-tops. For quite a few moments he stood silent with his head half hung down. Then he bit his lips with obvious nervousness and lifted his head with a solemnity with which he seemed to be seeking to control the emotional ferment in his person, to be isolating his real sensations from the spurious, to be quarrelling with his own sense of dignity as a middle-classs person and yet resisting simplicity, lest he might be dragged down to uniformity with the dull mass before him. He hesitated again, as if looking for words, and began mildly:

'Brothers . . . I am happy to be here among you . . . and, I am touched by the honour that you have done me. . . .'

His face was flushed with a paroxysm of self-awareness, and it seemed as if it was torture for him to contact this throng even though they looked up to him open-eyed with admiration and gave him the strength of their affection, even though they strained towards him with the sympathy of mouths forming words for the stutterer in him. But he was an individual, isolated by his bent and could only turn inwards for succour.

'I have great pleasure in formally declaring this building open . . .' he said, suddenly anxious to spit it out.

This most significant sentence fell flat on peasant ears. Schooled in British-Indian schools where the reward of oratory was hand-clapping applause, the Professor paused but did not find the slightest movement among a people who were emerging for the first time from the fathomless depths of fear to an awareness of their togetherness. They did not know the ethics of the debating room and they had accepted the Professor, with all his hesitations, as they accepted everything, as a legend, as a learned man who had come to give them light, who had come to extricate them from their suffering, and expected him to speak, to harangue, to tell them wise things, to persuade them with loud words.

Professor Verma sat down, perspiring through his ordeal and flushed.

Lalu was disappointed that the great man had not spoken longer, but the Professor had seemed to be in difficulties, like a new swimmer in heavy waters. And, in a way, the essential

words of his brief speech now seemed to be highly eloquent, specially through the abrupt ending with which he had arrested his own sense of importance from overpowering him and the admission of his own failure to contact the people, implicit in this control. The people, too, seemed now, through the ensuing silence, to be impressed with the hesitations and the naturalness of the Professor's speech and amplified its content to the oracular proportions demanded by the legend of the visitor's repute as a saint like Gandhi.

'Brothers,' announced the Count after a pause, 'after the wise man's blessings you will have a few facts and figures from me, because my four eyes have made me almost an expert about debits and credits. . . .'

There were the usual smiles at the Count's words and the confusion of inquiring whispers.

The soft, easy black faces of the peasants seemed to become intensely alive as they turned to this leader.

The Count wasted no time in trying to establish communion with the men. He stood now a round penguin of a figure, abrupt and straightforward, a man who had transformed his lordly ego by a deliberate effort of the will into the stance of a political leader.

'Comrades,' he continued, lifting a printed sheet of *Naya Hind* in his hand. 'I suppose you have often heard that this country is tottering on the brink of an abyss. Of course, there has never been a time when this country has not been tottering on the brink of an abyss—so far as you are concerned. . . . But no sudden earthquake has ever made it actually drop into the sea. And to you there is no reason why you should get heated about the lapse of freedom in our parts.'

There were roars of laughter at this.

But by the time he had come to talk of political freedom, the very magic of the word seemed to transmute his voice into a high pitch, though it darkened the men's wills and submerged them in a brooding silence. He sensed the peasants' boredom and remembering Sarshar's advice spoke of the kisan's distress. How they surged in uprushing waves, as if their blind hearts were being pulled out of their places by the half comprehensi-

ble words in the Count's throat. After showing how the holding of each peasant had been reduced to the size of a grave, he harangued them to join the peasants' union that he was forming. Then he said:

'Comrade Lal Singh will now read the demands which we have drawn up,' and sat down, the liquid of hot tears in his eyes.

Lalu was startled at this sudden commission. He snatched the paper which the Count was thrusting towards him and turned to the peasants with a smile on his face.

'Long live Comrade Lal Singh, the builder of the Kisan Sabha!' Ram Din shouted teasingly.

The peasants took up the call seriously, for they were now hypnotized into a spell.

'Some talk while I act,' said Lal Singh ambiguously to Ram Din as well as to the crowd, silencing the throng with a raised hand. But as he began the emotionalism of the Punjabi in him overpowered the mind which sat in judgment, and his soul seemed to become an indivisible utterance on his lips. . . .

'Brothers,' he said, 'Comrade Rampal Singh has been talking to you about the Sarkar. Some of us don't even know who the Sarkar is. I did not know of this daylight thief till I had been bereft of my land, my family, of everything I possessed and till Comrade Verma told me what I had lost. Like some other folk, I have been a soldier in the pay of the Sarkar and have fought in the war for, what I have lately heard described, as the self-determination of small nations. . . . Though the thunder of that war ceased for me after I had been in it only a few months, I remember having seen some part of the shattered world which was struck by its lightning fury. I can see the dead lying in ugly contortions on the battlefield, and I can see the long row of twisted and broken lives, trailing across landscapes both in Europe and in our own country, where green fields had been. You will ask where is Europe? Is it near the sun or the moon? And why was there a war? Was one king wanting to be more powerful than another?. . . You have guessed the reason. . . . The Sarkar was fighting against its rivals in Germany for the possession of our souls and our bodies. We were promised freedom, but we were rewarded with grape-

shot at Amritsar. . . . Now the English thieves and the Indian thieves, the landlords and capitalists, have joined hands together and are robbing us in broad daylight. . . . They have created a famine which is robbing you of the means of livelihood and forcing you on to the hard, broken metalled roads, into the swamps, and on to the pavements of cities, to the filth and degradation of living like stray dogs, because there is not even work to be had in the few new factories, because there is no light, no hope and not even death to relieve you of your misery. . . .'

The deepened hush of a terrible, deadly silence bound the men as he broke their resistance with the poisoned knife-edges of his tongue. It was extraordinary how the sheer force of his sincerity welled up in him and demolished the first impulse to show off, and made him express the torment of his spirit without violating the truth in him. And yet as he finished, he felt somewhat ridiculous to himself, as his voluminous gong-like voice had raised his words to a high and melodramatic pitch. But, aware of the hundreds of eyes uplifted towards him, earnestly, he recovered his self-confidence and, knowing that their utter simplicity and naïve faith would keep him from vulgarity, he continued:

'Let us vow then, let us vow to assert ourslves. But, first, those of you who want to join the Kisan Sabha raise your hands. . . .'

The men hesitated and looked at each other smilingly as if waiting for direction like sheep.

'High up,' Lalu called with a laugh.

He seemed to be running away with their hearts, to be demolishing their half-suppressed, half-expressed fears and thoughts, to make them incarnate in an inchoate, collective urge and then to snatch this urge from them and keep it in his own hands. They raised their hands in a burst of enthusiasm.

'Shout these vows after me, then,' he called.

And they shouted after him, some in high-pitched, discordant accents, some in whispers, that they would not pay illegal exactions, would not acquiesce in forced labour, would not sell produce at market prices, would not pay nazrana even if their

refusal invited eviction, would not plough an evicted field, would not rest till the eviction laws were repealed.

'Here is the paper on which these demands are written,' Lalu said in a conversational tone, waving the sheets of *Naya Hind*. 'It is a newspaper in which you will find everything about your lives.' Then he paused, as if he had thought of some bright idea and continued, 'it is one rupee per copy—how many of you want it?'

A host of hands went up.

'One rupee?' he repeated warningly.

The hands did not go down.

'No, the truth is, it is only a pice per copy,' he announced, after having gauged the intensity of their interest. 'I will come and distribute them.'

At this the Count got up and said:

'Brothers, scarcity of men made my father a judge.' (Laughter.) 'It is true!' (More laughter.) 'Anyhow, scarcity of men made me the President of this meeting.' (Redoubled laughter.) 'But I and my friends have talked a great deal. Now we want to listen to one of you. Here is a man whom we rescued from the bush by the cross-roads there,—he was being beaten up by a chaprasi of the Co-operative Bank. . . .'

'Aji Kanwar Sahib, don't tell lies!' came a loud, officious voice from behind the cluster of men who were standing under the banyan.

A flutter of excitement went through the crowd and they turned their heads to look.

The chaprasi stood with five policemen behind him.

'I saw you beating that man with my own eyes!' Lalu said from where he was distributing papers to the crowd, confident in the assurance that the meeting was going well.

'I have got the mark of the blow which you gave me on my body, salé!' the chaprasi answered.

'Don't buk!' Lal Singh shouted, his jaw stiffening with a new faith, hard as the righteous hatred he had worked up in himself.

'Arrest the brother-in-law!' the chaprasi called to the policemen.

And he himself sprang at Lal Singh with a fierce glint in his eyes and upraised hands.

Before Lalu knew where he was, the chaprasi and the policemen were showering blows on him with a sudden, rabid hate, while he cowered under his elbows, protecting his face and struggling to measure the shapes of the antagonists before him.

The air seemed to have evaporated and, in the sweltering heat of the afternoon, the whole crowd in the peaceful grove seemed to be scattering like receding shadows, falling apart in ramparts of shaking bodies, as in a mad folk dance. Some of the peasants huddled behind each other, some swayed like the branches of trees shaken in a storm, some stood stark and helpless, as if they were waiting for the knell of a new doom to fall on them, while a few, led by One-eyed Sukhua, rushed to separate the policemen from Lalu.

'Beat the misbegotten!' the chaprasi shrilled. 'Skin them all, the swine!'

And the policias grappled Sukhua, raised him by the scruff of the neck and dealt a left-handed blow on his face, till the one-eyed man stood petrified in silence, then shrieked and doubled over with his hands on his head, as if covering the shame and the blood that flowed from his vacant vision.

Meanwhile, Lalu emerged under cover of the blustering policemen's distraction and turned towards the chaprasi who had stood as a genii, thrusting his agents at the peasants with all the force of his vocal chords.

The chaprasi ran in a panic into the thick of the crowd, while Lalu pursued him, only to be pursued in his turn by the policemen who were battering whosoever came in their way, their bamboo staves clanging at random on bundles of human flesh, which rolled from side to side, in waves of fettered pain, or scattered in loose, haphazard knots, sobbing and helpless, as if fascinated by the swirling dandas, frightened yet incapable of escape from the firmament which enclosed them.

'Come to your senses!' the Count's voice rose above the throng for a moment, even as he saw the shimmering ghosts of his audience martyred over and over with blows of leather belts and staves.

'Stop it, you fools!' Professor Verma appealed from the dais where he stood like a pale guttering candle.

But now there were only dishevelled tuft-knots, dangling from bare heads, or hands lifted to heaven like monuments of indignation, or arms stretched in prayer and appeal with the hulks of policemen rounding up the shuffling crowd with a relentless, murderous rage. . . .

'Oh ré, Mother, I am blinded! Oh, God, I can't see at all,' One-eyed Sukhua was crying from the large emptiness under the banyan.

But no one heeded him, while the seething mass was gathering in the shadow of the new barn and, under the commands of Gupta and Ram Din, throwing mud bricks on the policias, and giving them pitched battle.

Lalu had followed the chaprasi under the dais and dragged him out, only to drop him when the policemen came, spitting in the heat, charging and murmuring, 'May I rape the mother of your equality-preaching! May I . . .'

Convulsed, but spurred by the brickbat defence of Ram Din and Gupta, Lalu jumped on to the platform and roared:

'Come and arrest me if you dare!'

'They dare not touch my men,' the Count called from where he and Verma now bent over Sukhua. 'They have blinded this poor wretch.'

'Blinded Sukhua! . . . Let them hurt the Kanwar Sahib and then we will see! We will teach them!' A babble arose from the barn where the mass near the platform had taken shelter.

Ram Din ran towards the Count, while Gupta rushed to the platform.

The policemen rallied towards the platform, flashing fierce eyes and threatening staves, but Lalu held the peon under his foot and towered above them now. They stopped short of the dais, desperate and muttering foul revenge, as they wiped their blank faces and stood away somewhat cowed. . . .

A volley of soft mounds of earth fell on them from the crowd behind the barn.

'Don't stone the bastards!' Lalu called, giddy and ponderous. And he released the chaprasi from his grasp.

'You will see who is alive and who is dead!' said the police sergeant.

'Go, and get warrants for anyone you want to arrest!' roared the Count, walking up to the sergeant. 'And don't come flaunting your bloody staves here again. Do you see that you have blinded that man there? . . . .' His wrenched heart made Kanwar Rampal Singh's voice shrill and broken.

The policias fell away with the chaprasi, their heavy-browed brown eyes hanging down, as if in the face of majesty.

The comrades and some of the men who had gone to the meeting from the nearby estates returned to the Count's room. And there they sat huddled, while Dr. Badri Nath bandaged Sukhua's eyes and dressed the bruises on the limbs of others.

The peasants seemed heavy and sad as they crowded in a strange kind of nearness, a kind of physical sense of brotherhood, not only because the shock of the riot had bound them together, but because they were frightened, as if they anticipated the descent on them of yet another doom. They looked at each other furtively and whispered under their breaths, but most of the time their soft eyes were turned to the Count in worshipful silence, as if he were a God who would give them succour.

'It is the curse of Bhupendra's wife which has triumphed on me, Maharaj,' blinded Sukhua said, as he leaned back against the cow-tailed cushion which Ram Din had put behind him. 'I am sure she is a witch who can do magic. . . .'

'It is the curse of God, brother,' said Raghu. 'God punishes everyone for his deeds, and you will have to bear it now, for Bhupendra must have told God the story of how you killed him.'

'Was that chaprasi sent by God then?' Madhu asked indignantly.

'Indeed, he was the messenger of God!' mocked Lalu. 'And he came with those hosts of the Lord, the police! And still other hosts are surely on the way!'

'To be sure, perhaps, you are right to laugh at me,' said Sukhua, pathetic and lifeless. 'Now that I saw what that chaprasi did, I remember what all chaprasis used to do in the

villages round Partabgarh — though, believe me, Maharaj, I never did such a thing when I was a chaprasi. . . . One of them once demanded a blanket of homespun from a peasant as a bribe for taking him to the Deputy Collector's Babu. . . . All of us took grain from peasant folk, but I never behaved as this chaprasi of the Co-operative Bank, who has ruined my life. . . .'

'It is the big thief, the Sarkar, behind all the small thieves,' said the Count.

'To be sure it is these thieves,' said Madhu, 'the big thieves and the small thieves, Maharaj. . . .'

'One thief is easy to satisfy,' said Mithu, the victim who was the cause of the afternoon's offensive. 'The Sarkar takes the money like the moneylender, and none of us complain, but it is the hundreds of small thieves, whose bellies are not satisfied with eating our grain, and who insist on having their luggage carried. . . .'

'Fools!' said the Count, losing his patience with them. But even as he said so, he realized that to their simple minds the Sarkar was an unalterable fact, a force like the sun, an inevitability, which they never questioned, and that their hatred was concentrated on the petty tyrants, the agents of authority, and all the unscrupulous small fleas and big fleas who sucked their lifeblood.

They had hardly settled down to this talk about the iniquity of the authorities, when there was the grating of motor wheels outside, a swift stirring and a loud, compelling voice could be heard ordering the palace servants about.

Waves of heat swirled from one end of the room to the other over the agitated silence, and hung in the dark shadows, like ghosts of fear exorcized from the tormented spirit of the crowd.

There was a shuffling of forms on the steps outside and some of the men who were nearest the door scurried like rabbits.

'Stay where you are,' Captain Effendi said effortlessly, as he entered with Kanwar Birpal Singh and Mr. Gulzarilal Topa, the Sub-Inspector of the Co-operative Society. The latter was

a veritable giant of a man in a khaki shirt and shorts and polo topee, as he came in, followed by the chaprasi and ten policemen in a single file.

'Brothers, sit still,' the Count said, affecting a feeling of indifference as he tried to control his anger.

An undertone of terror went through the crowd after the scattering men had settled, but they did not stir now, though the dark ebony of their foreheads was beaded with sweat in the glare of the oil lamp which stood on the dresser.

'I have a warrant for your arrest,' Captain Effendi said, tapping Lal Singh on the shoulder, in that curious Hindustani which his thin Afridi lips accentuated into a half-snarl, half-admonition. And then he stood looking round determinedly, unable to act otherwise than as a caricature of himself, as he tried to simulate the look of his English colleagues on a face that was too blanched an ivory to pass off for an Englishman's.

Lalu squirmed a little as though he were resisting the worst moments of his rising resentment, but then he said, 'At your service,' and he knew he had survived.

'Effendi Sahib wants us to yield all the culprits in the riot,' Kanwar Birpal Singh said to his elder brother in a low voice.

'All of us are here,' said the Count, 'and none resisting arrest.'

'May I see the warrant! . . .' said Professor Verma.

Captain Effendi produced a paper and said: 'Lal Singh, Gupta, Ram Din, Sukhua, Raghu, Madhu, Mithu, and three other accomplices of Mithu to be identified by the chaprasi.'

'I suppose I am to be spared because my father was a brigand, and Verma Sahib, because he is an apostle of peace!' said the Count with a deliberate laugh. 'I regard that as a great honour!'

'It is a question of life and death for us landlords,' his younger brother said. 'And you are laughing. We must put an end to this tomfoolery! . . .' The Count looked away from him in disgust.

'Go ahead and identify your men, oh, bey chaprasi,' said Mr. Topa, towering over every one as he breathed long breaths and sweated.

The chaprasi raised his joined hands towards the august of the company with a mute appeal in his face and then turned briskly towards the men, pouncing on one man who was immediately near the centre, blindly, then realizing his mistake and pointing to two other men anyhow, but unable to distinguish them, and groping among the faces by the pillars, only to give up the attempt at recognition.

Some of the bolder men in the crowd were protesting at this indiscriminate spotting. But Captain Effendi wheeled round and, stooping over the bunch, said with exaggerated emphasis: 'The slightest disobedience will mean a bullet from the constables. So submit silently!'

'Are you sure these are the men who beat you?' the Count said to the chaprasi, after the man had finished spotting the accused.

'Yes, Huzoor,' the chaprasi turned and answered with his hands joined in reverence.

'You want the man with whom you had a scuffle by the cross-roads,' the Count said. 'He is here on my left.'

'Oh yes, Maharaj!' The chaprasi fairly jumped from his feet to put his hand on the man's shoulder.

'That makes eleven men.' The Count turned to Captain Effendi. 'Not ten.'

'This man is surely not one of them,' said Mr. Topa, trying to save his servant from his blunder in spotting the wrong man. 'Misbegotten fool of a chaprasi, are you in your senses?'

'No, Huzoor,' said the chaprasi, frightened.

'Brother,' said the Count, raising his voice above the babble of amazement which ensued. 'Please do not resist arrest. Those of you whom this chaprasi has indicated to the police should get up quickly and go with Effendi Sahib. It seems that they don't think that a landlord can commit any crime. So I am left behind. But I shall look after your interests. To be a peasant means to be lumped together like cattle and to be taken to the lock-up, to be a member of the Kisan Sabha means that the Sarkar does not love you,—but if you go quietly, as you have kept calm now, they will never be able to break your spirit. . . .'

Docile, outraged, wronged, afraid and yet without any sign of the panic to which they were prone, the accused submitted to the arrest after the Count had spoken.

Lalu had a clutch of horror as he got up and advanced. The blood in his head swirled, and his face was covered with sweat, but he kept a hold on himself. . . .

'"Bolo comrade Lal Singh ki jai!"' the Count gave a shout.

The peasants in the room nearly tore the ceiling as they followed this lead, as if the terror that lay dormant in their hearts had burst in a collective lust of vengeance.

The room was electric with rival wills, and the faces of the men were tense and drawn.

'"Bolo Kisan bhaion ki jai!"' Lalu called.

The echo rose like the screams of wounded animals. . . .

VII

THE agents of Authority had triumphed. But it seemed to Lalu that they had not succeeded in breaking the spirit of the kisans. For, from the way the men had shouted their farewell to him, they seemed to have given up their habitual respect, born of fear, and discovered a new will which had hovered, ominous and incalculable in their obscure faces, so that he had himself been frightened, not knowing what they would do to the police at any moment. He had heard the heaving of one man's breath next to him and the curious, gurgling whispers and raised, intent heads all round, the doleful looks of glazed, soft eyes, suspended in fear, and the instinctive loyalty to Authority to which they were born, and with which they died, had been transmuted into a sense of opposition. A word from Kanwar Rampal Singh and they would have resisted; certainly they would have broken loose like rabble in a panic if the Count and Professor Verma had not been present. But their reverence for the landlord patriarch was strong in them, specially their reverence for such a rebel landlord-patriarch as Kanwar Rampal Singh.

This feeling filled Lalu as he sat with Ram Din and the eight others on a bench in the charge room of Partabgarh Police Station waiting for the sergeant to come. The clock of the Town Hall struck the hour of midnight, and still there was no sign of the sergeant, while the policemen who had brought them were getting more and more impatient to put them in the lock-up and go off duty.

'When will the bahin-chod sála come?' one of the constables said, lifting his voice in a wheezy, manotonous voice.

'The night has hardly advanced and you talk of being thirsty,' answered one of the warders, who stood on night duty on the verandah. 'The sergeant must be making merry at the house of Akhtari Jan and you have sent Jafar Khan to look for him at home.'

'When will he come from Akhtari Jan's house, brother?' blind Sukhua ventured. 'My eyes pain me under this bandage.'

'Go, keep still!' snapped the first policeman. 'If it hadn't been for your fighting and quarrelling there would have been no special duty for us to-night.' And then he coughed uproariously and shot the phlegm across the verandah.

'Control your tongue,' Lal Singh protested to the policeman, to assert his own dignity and that of his followers.

'For two days and a half the washerman's donkeys were kings,' said Ram Din to show his disgust of the policemen.

At this there was a low rumble of murmurs among the peasants, backing up the leader's protests.

The men were of varying ages and did not seem as strong individually as they seemed together. Mithu, the young victim of the cross-roads incident, was pocked-marked and skinny; Raghu and Madhu, and the three men arrested without being properly recognized, were prematurely twisted; blind Sukhua was the only interesting figure. But they all sat casually, yawning and tired, except that they were irritated by the handcuffs which prevented them from wiping their sweat, and almost oblivious of the few hard-boned, efficient policemen who had taken off their turbans and who were fanning themselves with the ends of their khaki tunics. They had become different from the broken, demoralized, backboneless creatures who would

abjectly catch hold of the feet of a policeman and grovel in the dust with joined hands, completely unlike the gentle, kindly men with bottomless souls who were for ever sunk in the misery to which they always resigned themselves.

The new movement seemed to have given them a new faith. It was extraordinary how any organized action gave them a new sense of power. Lalu remembered how, in spite of the trials of the abortive funeral procession from Nasirabad, most of the peasants had persevered and reached Allahabad. It was good to keep them on the move, to keep the struggle going, though where was it going, where was it leading to? And was Comrade Sarshar's advice being followed?

To be sure, Professor Verma had written down some of the immediate aims in *Naya Hind*, but how were these aims to be realized if they were all imprisoned. And Lalu felt a certain impatience for final victory in his wild, enthusiastic nature; he thought of freedom which was said to be the national ideal, and he hoped for Revolution, not knowing precisely what these ideals meant but enthralled by the sound of the words and the vague things associated with them, the clearing out of the Sarkar and the siezing of land from the landlords by the peasantry. . . . Occasionally the violence and the land-hunger of the peasant in him made the seizing of land by killing the landlords the most exciting vision, the thing, he felt, which would most stir him to action, though that also made him feel afraid and guilty. And, more often, he felt that he would have achieved the revenge of his manhood against them if they were merely brought off their perches, deprived of their land and money and just dragged down into the mire of the underworld where the peasants now struggled, so that the grandees could taste a bit of their own medicine and then be made into human beings who could be given their due share of land to cultivate. Secretly, and in spite of himself, he believed that men were good but misguided, though he would not have dared to say so in the presence of the Count if the talk of liquidating the landlords and capitalists was ever going on, and he would never have let slip a kind word for the Zamindars if he were making a speech. . . .

'The sergeant will not come back to-night,' said the warder, stopping to rest awhile after walking up and down his beat. 'He told me there was a Mujra at Akhtari's and that he wouldn't come back till dawn.'

'Then why didn't you say so earlier,' the constables cried almost in a chorus.

'I told you so, salé,' replied the warder nonchalantly as he stood wiping the sweat from his neck.

'Get up then, get up and let us put you in the lock-up, you bastards!' one of the policemen shouted at the accused.

'So we are not going to be charged, after all!' Lalu exclaimed, almost elated at the irregularity in the procedure of the police.

'No, brothers, come,' the policeman who had just been bastarding them said persuasively, knowing that the accused could take advantage of the technical hitch and make it difficult for the police.

The peasants looked to Lalu for the lead and the policemen cast quick, apprehensive glances towards him.

Vague as the ultimate objectives of the struggle were, Lalu felt exhilarated to be the first of the gang going to the lock-up, proud that it was he who had borne the attack in the afternoon, and intensely aware that he was the ring-leader whom Captain Effendi had marked out for arrest and whom the peasants and the police in the charge-room looked up to as a 'hooligan of number ten.'

'Come, this way, through the verandah,' the policeman urged courteously, patting Lalu on the shoulder.

As he got up to go he wanted more to be hated and feared as a hooligan than to be admired as a hero. For, self important and vain as he was because of his literacy and the varied experiences of his youth, he had yet inherited enough of the 'at your service' religiosity, which had prevailed in his father's home, to throw himself with great zeal into the work for the peasants, and had become one with them more easily than any one of the leaders except Ram Din, though as its best, there was an element of personalism in his attitude which he tried to slur over, a trace of individual superiority which he took for granted. . . .

The Town Hall clock struck the quarter hour and a dog yelped in the distance, followed by other dogs in rapid succession. . . .

There was a hoarse chatter among the policemen in the verandah, as one of them struggled to find the lock in the dim light of the hurricane lamp which hung in the hall, while the prisoners breathed heavily as if to fill their lungs with air before entering the small dark cell behind the iron bars.

They squatted down on their haunches in the lock-up after the gate had been locked on them. They huddled close to the door because they were handcuffed to each other and wanted the air of the verandah.

But soon they had to move a little farther away into the cell, because swarms of mosquitoes and moths buzzed round the kerosene oil lamp and the air on the verandah turned out to be an illusion.

Already, however, they seemed to be swimming in a stinking cesspool of sweat and there was a bubble and froth of tongues as they sighed for breath.

'Oh, my eyes,—and this bitichod bandage!' Sukhua sighed.

'The cell is yours for the night, brothers, lie down. . . .' counselled Lal Singh.

'And try to sleep?' mocked Ram Din. 'Wah, my leader. It would require faith in God, and more, to do that. . . .'

'If you leave men to the mercy of God first dig some graves,' retorted Lalu.

'We want ten graves,' said Sukhua.

'Don't talk, and go to sleep,' the warden shrilled as he began to walk up and down the courtyard.

At this they all sat back in a row and tried to arrange themselves for sleep. But the sweat trailed down their bodies in rills and their bare arms and legs were covered with a mixed dough of dust and sweat, while the mosquitoes which nestled in the corners of the cell scattered whiningly and droned over their heads as if reconnoitring before making an attack. Some of the men raised themselves on their elbows and strained to look for light in the darkness, as if the light would bring air with it, and hope, but only thick shadows hung in the cell,

like festoons of heat which had been left over by the day and which would not move till the cool of the early morning. Except for the heavy rustling of their forms and their short gasps there was not a sound for long moments during which the warden outside the verandah walked to the other end of the beat.

Presently a cock crowed in some alleyway beyond the Town Hall and set them laughing, and they began to talk again.

'He is already announcing the morning while it is pitch dark before my eyes,' said Sukhua in a torment of self-pity.

'Oh, these illegally begotten mosquitoes!' Ram Din shouted as he slapped his thigh to kill one which was penetrating his haunches.

'Don't hit them, brother,' said Mithu. 'Perhaps they too suffer.'

'One does and all suffer,' said Sukhua, bitterly insinuating that they were all here because of Mithu.

'If it were not for the shadow of inauspicious persons like you we wouldn't be here,' said Raghu.

'You speak to me like that again and I shall break your skull!' shrieked blind Sukhua, raising his torso with a sudden twist of his body.

'Come, you hit him and I shall show you, rape-daughter!' said Madhu, lifting his handcuffed right hand so that old Raghu, next to him, began to murmur the various names of God.

'Keep quiet, fear the wrath of the policeman,' said Ram Din.

But the two antagonists were already struggling forward, and groping towards each other in the semi-dark, their bodies glistening with sweat, their breath heaving and their tongues spluttering abuse, while cries of good counsel rose high-pitched and fell on deaf ears.

Lalu's heart pounded fiercely in the stifling dark as he knew that if he did not intervene there would soon be a tangle of wrestling bodies struggling against each other savagely.

'Everyone who stirs shall suffer,' he whispered, and then struck a kick at the rumps of Sukhua and another at the heels of Madhu so that they fell away in silence.

'Oh, sons of pigs! shouted the warden, thrusting the point of his bayonet through the bars, 'if you make any more noise and attempt to escape I shall drive this steel into your hearts.'

'Go, brother-in-law, mosquito!' Ram Din said with a deliberate ambiguity in his address. 'Go, you insect, making all this noise!'

The warden stared hard with sullen eyes into the silent darkness and could only hear the hum of the mosquitoes and the flies. He knew what the prisoners in the lock-up were up to. He swung his frame across the bars in a last menacing gesture of power and walked away.

The sergeant came in the early hours of the morning just to look in at the station and see that nothing sensational had happened overnight, so that he could go home and sleep for a while to recover from the fatigue of the revelry at Akhtari Jan's. But the ten men in the lock-up, arrested by Captain Effendi himself and rushed to Partabgarh in a lorry, were a stern reminder of the fact that he was a Government servant paid to be on duty and not merely an official in his own right, who had to provide for his old age by a certain amount of extra mural activity in organizing gambling bouts, negotiating the finances of the best whores, licensing liquor and generally helping to maintain law and order in the underworld of the town.

'Why, bey brothers-in-law, illegally begotten! what is this plot you have been hatching, sons of Gandhi!' he said, as he opened the lock-up, stumbled in and began to apply third degree methods by kicking the sprawling bodies about.

Sticky and wet, as though some stale water had been poured over them, the men had slept a disturbed sleep for an hour or two as the heat of the night had glided into the grateful numbness of the dawn, and now they awoke, moaning, 'burburring' and complaining, as if they were still involved in their nightmares. The roosters in the nearby gullies were crowing lustily and they turned restlessly from the places where the sweat on their half-naked bodies had kneaded the dust into a thick paste.

'Wake up, wake up, this is a police thana and not a waiting-room at an Estation!' The sergeant ground the words even as he sought to work himself up to the intensity required for the proper application of third-degree methods. Wake up and get ready to make your confessions! Rapers of your sisters! . . . .' And then he turned to the warder outside: 'Bhola Ram, bring them into my room!'

'Right, Holdar Kalbir Singh!' answered the warder.

Lalu sat up coolly, stirring Ram Din casually, and opened his eyes wide to take in the departing form of Sergeant Kalbir Singh, a rotund, middle-sized figure with a short neck and great big boulders of thickly putteed legs.

'Come on,' said constable Bhola Ram from the verandah. 'And let me give you prisoners a word of advice: if you behave as stubborn sons of asses and don't confess quickly Havildar Kalbir Singh will use the cane. So come on and try to become human beings! Come on, hurry!'

The sweating faces of the men were turned to sepoy Bhola Ram, silent and apprehensive. The drowsy air of the night lay thick on their brains and they did not quite understand this talk about confessions.

'Come on, brothers,' said Lal Singh with a faint mockery in his voice. 'Every brave man has a rifle in his hand, or a truncheon suspended from his waist, besides the canes soaked in urine which are always at hand. . . . Come on meekly and don't dare to breathe. . . . And remember to salute the Havildar! . . .'

'Shut up, salé, stop your tain tain!' said Bhola Ram and, leaping at Lalu, he struck a thappar on his face.

'Oh, I forgot to say, that you should call every policia by the title of Havildar!' said Lalu coolly.

'Shut up, or I will push this bayonet through you!' raved Bhola Ram.

'Now, won't that be too prickly? And I hear it makes a nasty puddle of blood when it goes home!' Lalu fooled, livid yet calm.

The constable charged into the room swinging the butt end of his rifle like a broom and cursing as the sweat poured down his face.

'Beat the rascals and if they won't come out hit them hard!' Havildar Kalbir Singh said as he came to the door with his dumbell-like arms akimbo.

The peasants scurried hither and thither like cattle tied together in a barn.

'Oh, Jafar Khan, Apte Hassan, Sardar Singh!' Havildar Kalbir Singh called to some of the constables who were asleep on charpoy, in the courtyard of the police station. 'Utho! And see that these swine don't escape. . . . Bhola Ram, give them two stripes each for their insolence.'

But just then the telephone bell rang in his room and he rolled down towards it like a ball of steel to a magnet.

The hastily awakened constables hurled themselves on the prisoners, as if they were competing for a police medal by arresting escaping criminals in an alarm, striking the men right and left as if they were avenging their unquenched sleep on them. But they had no opposition, for the men were marching out of the room in twos into the verandah and then into Havildar Kalbir Singh's presence.

'May the scorpions sting the bottoms of their mothers, they made my sleep illegal!' said Apte Hassan drying the sweat between his legs by ruffling his loincloth.

'Where is the cane?' asked Jafar Khan. 'May I rape the mothers of their mothers!'

'I will extort the truth out of them,' began Sardar Singh.

'Aré, wait!' Kalbir Singh whispered hoarsely after covering the mouthpiece with his hand. 'Captain Effendi Sahib is speaking: the Deputy Commissioner Sahib is on his way here!' Then he inclined his head and, screwing his face to attention, listened to Captain Effendi, breathing, 'Yes, sir; yes, sir,' the while.

At length he hung the receiver up, phewed a hot breath and, wiping his face with his elbow, turned to the constables:

'Get into your uniforms, boys, the Deputy Commissioner Sahib will be here any minute to see these men.'

The policemen relaxed their hardening muscles and stood away with drooping shoulders, quite disappointed at not being

able to exert their power for evoking truth from the limbs of the prisoners.

'There is only one consolation,' Lalu mocked, emboldened by the sudden change that had come into the sergeant's manner after he had sweated himself into a dough 'yessiring' to Captain Effendi, 'that God who made the peasants poor made them free, while the Sarkar who made the peasants policemen made them slaves. So while the peasant, who doesn't have much to eat, is often constipated, the policeman, who has to obey orders, shouts and raves and curses and runs about as if he has got dysentery. . . .'

'Stop your insolence! What are your names?' Kalbir Singh asked, opening a record book with uneasy, eager, stubs of fingers as he panted for breath.

'Come, brothers, give your names to the Havildar,' Lal Singh said to the men, 'Come, you are going to be released on bail as soon as the Deputy Commissioner arrives.'

'Don't bark, but give your name and particulars!' Sergeant Kalbir Singh said peremptorily.

Lalu obeyed Kalbir Singh and then sat back as Ram Din began to answer the questions.

Apart from a trace of the earlier bully, Kalbir Singh's face was now a heavy knot of abstraction. And, in spite of himself, Lalu relaxed his hatred of the policeman. He was a poor man, perhaps, whose cunning and bluff only covered the harassing struggle to house and clothe and feed a wife and children, who was only doing his duty and who had so often used that position as a vehicle to exalt his own meagre self that he was now a puffed-up balloon of pride inside as well as outside. Perhaps he was originally a peasant like most men in the army and the police, but one of those who chose the easy way out of poverty, who chose to be abject to the great so that he could be in a position to rob and bully the lowly and the poor. There were hundreds of such yeomen everywhere, waiting for a chance to serve their masters so that they could do a little bossing themselves in their turn—the more keen to do their duty if they enjoyed the additional privilege of a uniform, monuments of courage especially if they carried their batons

about with them, and frightening, oh demoniac, if they also had a rifle with a bayonet on top of it!

Kalbir Singh had hardly elicited all the information when there was a sound of motor-cars in the yard, and then the warder outside could be heard coming to attention. A little later a clean-shaven dark man in a tussore suite with a grey polo topee and octagonal glasses came in, followed by Kanwar Rampal Singh and Professor Verma, who were both rather heavy and still, as if they were tired of their love of humanity.

The sergeant got up to salute.

All the men rose as if the very air that had ushered the Deputy Collector into the room compelled this attitude.

'Havildar Sahib, these men are to be released on bail,' said the Deputy Commissioner in a cool, casual voice. 'Recognisances will be offered by Kanwar Rampal Singh Sahib of Rajgarh!'

'Yes, Huzoor,' said the sergeant, vigilant like a watchdog in the presence of his master.

'Oh, and if Captain Effendi comes, will you direct him to my bungalow,' said Mr. Mehta.

'Yes, Huzoor,' said Sergeant Kalbir Singh and signed to Apte Hassan to undo the handcuffs of the prisoners and stood waiting for further orders from the Deputy Commissioner. But the head of the district seemed a man of few words. He turned to Kanwar Rampal Singh and whispered something.

The Count gave Lal Singh and Ram Din instructions to charter a lorry for the peasants.

Then the dignitaries left, saluted by the sergeant and by the warders outside.

It was as simple as that, but it had been a great deal more complex.

At least that is what Lal Singh gathered when he met the Count walking round and round the neem tree in the courtyard of the palace that afternoon with his double-barrelled sporting gun under his arm.

'Say, friend, how goes it?' Kanwar Rampal Singh asked indifferently, as he looked up to the minarets of the palace to spot any wild pigeons which he could shoot.

But there were no pigeons resting there, as the sun's heat shimmered even in the shadows of the minarets with a terrific scorching brilliance. So the Count withdrew his gaze from the tops of the palace and, fixing Lalu with a deliberate stare, laughed and said:

'Say, friend, how did you get free?'

'You know that better than I do,' Lalu answered, 'I suppose he who plants the tree also waters it.'

The Count had apparently only been waiting for his opportunity to expatiate on his great achievement in bailing ten people out from the clutches of the law, especially when the Superintendent of Police of the district himself had taken out warrants for their arrest. He shook his head with the assurance of his greatness and began boastfully:

'What does he think himself, this upstart of an Effendi! He did not know that if he has the Nawab of Nasirabad for a father-in-law, we have Deputy Commissioner for a comrade. Now, if Effendi believes that every Hindu is a lentil-eating bania, I shall show him some of the guile of the banias! . . .'

'How did this Pathan come to marry a Taluqdar's daughter?' Lalu interrupted.

'Oh, the rape-sister!' the Count exploded. 'Colonel Roos-Keppel employed his father as a spy among the tribesmen and gave him a tract of land as a reward. So Effendi inherited an estate, went to Chiefs' College, Lahore, and began to believe that he was a strong man! Sála, he is a brainless fool! He has reckoned without all the weak little Hindus. . . . I am bringing Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari to fight the case. And for once all the cooked-up evidence of the police will be of no avail. . . .'

'Did I hear you say that the Deputy Commissioner is a comrade?' Lalu sought to change the conversation from Tiwari, whom he despised, to Mehta Sahib, whose calm dignity had impressed him at the police station.

'At least, he is a fellow-traveller, if he is not exactly a comrade, and we can use him!' bragged the Count. And then he laughed, saying, 'Mehta — there is a bania who got the better of Effendi, a real bania from Gujerat! Ho ho ho . . .' But he caught the look of impatient inquiry in Lalu's eyes and, taking

the boy's arm, began to walk round the neem tree, talking the while: 'Mr. Mehta is a weak young man who entered the Civil Service in an open competition with mathematics as his main subject. He comes from a lower middle-class family: his father was a grocer in Ahmedabad and his mother was a devout peasant woman. And he is rather an exception in the bureaucracy. I believe he got only five marks out of three hundred in the oral examination, because he is barely five foot four and has no pedigree, but the logarithms he had learnt at his father's grocery store stood him in good stead and he was one of the ten men who got into the Service that year. Fortunately, he never forgot his origins. Besides, his mother was a great admirer of Gandhi and that influenced our friend Gansham Das with vegetarianism and character. And, while he was at Cambridge, he heard Bertrand Russell an English philosopher who is somewhat of a rebel. He took to speaking at the Indian Students' weekly meetings at the Majlis and nearly ruined his career by the excess of zeal with which he allied himself with the nationalists who were there at that time. But he got off with a bare warning from the India Office and was posted to the Department of Agriculture in the U.P. Here, he discovered the plight of the Oudh peasantry. So he was torn between the dictates of reason and his loyalty to the Sarkar. The Government saw to it that the conflict in his mind should end: he was promoted from the secretariat to executive duty as a Deputy Commissioner. Since then he has been studying pictographs in the old caves of this part of the country to stifle his social conscience. But he is one of our contacts in the Civil Service. . . .'

Lalu was surprised and exhilarated at the thought that among the exalted hierarchy of rulers there should be some who were sympathetic to the cause. For, somehow, the isolation of the group of rebels at Rajgarh among the mass of people, who merely accepted the current state of things as an inevitable, unchanging fact, had often made him feel hopeless and alone. Apparently there were some who, unschooled to think of themselves as responsible for maintaining law and order, were amenable to new ideas and influences . . . But one thing Lalu

had never been able to grasp: why, if most of the officers of the state were learned men, did they administer laws which oppressed the poor?

'Do you think, Kanwar Singh,' he asked naively, 'that all the Sahibs and the officials are deliberately out to suppress the ryots?'

The Count hesitated for a moment, for he had never asked himself this question. Then, true to the instinct which never allowed him to confess that there was anything he did not know, he answered:

'I do not think they are all highly conscious, ingenious devils. In fact, I think, in principle, they are all for making people happy. . . . Only from childhood they are imbued with the idea of their superiority as little masters, and they grow up to the dignity appropriate to the heirs of the ruling class, and feel that, they are righteously guarding the material as well as the spiritual heritage which has come down to them through their forefathers against the greed of the have-nots. . . . The code of Manu, the laws of Mohammed, as well as the British Indian Penal Code, are all agreed on the sanctity of private property. And nobody has ever questioned this, even though the avarice of Rajas and Maharajas has been known to cause wars and a certain amount of litigation. But this new discontent which has been trickling into Hindustan from Russia in spite of the most rigorous efforts to quarantine the disease, — why, the organization of this Peasant Union seems to them a direct warning! Bolshevism with a vengence! . . . The destructive, bloodthirsty creed which propagates hatred and violence among the canaille and threatens to upset the natural order of things, which inspires the low, dirty ryots with the belief that they are as good as the refined Sahibs, Rajas, Nawabs and other exalted and well-born members of society any day! . . . Why, they say, this has taken humanity back to the night of history, when there was no religion, no education and utter barbarism prevailed, to a state of cannibalism such as exists in some parts of Africa and Russia! For, is it not well known, they say, that during the Russian Revolution the rabble boiled the flesh of the children of the aristocrats to eat? Red ruin and

anarchy! . . . As for the Sahibs, they think that the mutiny was nothing to what would happen if the peasants got inflamed. And the landlords, minor chieftains and aristocrats, who were once ringleaders of the mutineers, but who have made their peace and settled down to their rewards, think that people like you are spreading dangerous, new-fangled notions which are against morality and against religion, against the tradition of Indian civilization which is said to be that of Ram Raj — the perfect King, with a ray of divinity in him and an obedient docile praja, people! And, whatever the differences between the Sahibs, who are afraid of the bogy of the brown race which is going to engulf the few whites in the world, and the rickety old landlords, they have joined together to nip communism in the bud! . . . To tell you the truth, I am feeling a bit nervous of you folk myself, — that is why I carry this gun about with me all day! . . .'

Lalu laughed at the light-hearted buffoonery of the Count and felt a little more elated than he had done this morning after a sleepless night in the lock-up. It was strange to him that the same princely order which was all for maintaining the heritage of its forefathers should have produced a person like Kanwar Rampal Singh. Except, as he had walked and talked under the shade of the neem tree, in fact as he had strutted about holding forth as a leader for months, the Count himself had seemed a masterful man, so that Lalu had felt the pressure of his person, of a will no less aristocratic than the will of the other landlords. For a moment, he felt suspicious of the proud, assertive, aggressive declamatory leader. Then he reproached himself for harbouring doubts about one to whom he owed not only his release from the hands of the police but his bread and butter.

'You may grin, but it is true,' the Count continued. 'As a matter of fact, I am not sure whether what the upper orders say about the lower orders being lazy is not true! "Feed us the dogs, but bark yourself," they seem to say, Why, I have been wanting the men at the Kisan Nagar farm to start an oil mill, but they haven't done anything about it. Oh, they are that cunning! Truly, if you want to be impoverished without

knowing it, feed the labourers and go to sleep. Ungrateful wretches!'

Lalu did not know if the Count was serious or laughing. He turned to look.

But Kanwar Rampal Singh silenced him, as he looked up to the porch of the air-house on the right-hand side of the palace and, turning, whispered, 'Five of them.'

And he stood for the briefest second, lifted his gun and, before Lalu knew that he had taken aim, pressed his trigger and felled three slate-coloured pigeons stone dead on the heat-singed earth.

For weeks afterwards the sun beat down upon the Gangetic plain, burning the land into a dry, cindery, black, caked clay, singeing the vegetation, sucking up energy from the limbs of men; drying the pools, puddles and ponds, till the cattle hoofed ferociously and dug in vain for moisture and sat bespattered in their own dung; suffocating the birds, who flew in little hops seeking food and air; scorching even the beetles and grasshoppers who lay in a dead silence in the roots and the crevices, as if the earth had reached the noon of the year and was waiting for something, for a breath of cool air, for a touch of moisture. Even the Ganges had shrivelled into a rivulet as the canals had taken its water in the north.

Forced to stay his hand until the trial, Lalu procrastinated in the heat, eating his heart out in a torment of frustration and loneliness. Conditions had seldom been so bad as in this year of drought. In parts of Oudh human existence had reached its lowest depths. The women and children of landless peasants roamed through the deserted streets of villages, deformed by nature and malnutrition, whining in their rags. Men were so hungry that they were known to have drunk soup of heat-singed bushes. And as he could only look at this misery from a distance, and the struggle seemed to become abstract, he worried and lost his own hunger.

'I know you are impatient for the Revolution, but at least eat, otherwise you will just fade away,' Maya remonstrated.

'Do you realize that they are evicting peasants at the least little excuse,' he said. 'And we can't do a thing.'

'I expect so,' she said, fanning her face with a cane fan, the edges of which she had decorated with fine lace. 'While I remember it, will you fetch me some yards of muslin to make some head-cloths with, when you go to Partabgarh.'

'We used to sing in the war of a girl called Harnami whose one constant demand was for high-heeled shoes,' Lalu said, talking more to himself than to her. 'But a great many of those who sang did not return from the war. Almost every patch of the trenches became a graveyard. They say that crores died there, these crores sacrificed themselves, became martyrs,—they did not know for what! And many of us returned home to find that the world had changed, that our homes did not stand there any more.'

'I think the heat is affecting your head,' Maya said, and she stared at him, really frightened as if he had gone mad.

For a moment he kept his head hung down and remained silent, wondering what to do to communicate with her, to get past the barrier which divided him from her, to convert her. But he knew that if he suddenly stopped talking and didn't say anything more she would really be frightened and think he was crazy. So he continued his monologue, feeling ridiculous and foolish yet persistent:

'In one country, at least, in Russia, the folk have already brought about a Revolution. . . . The rumbling of this earthquake, which shook one of the vastest countries of the world, will soon be heard in other parts of the world. . . .'

'There are some people,' she said, 'who go through life, *howling against everybody and everything*.'

'You know, childling, that there are some squeezers of the earth who are suffering imprisonment with hard labour on a quarter of a bigha of land.'

'Now, it is funny to me,' said Maya, 'how many people have got the notion that a landlord has treasure chests into which he can dip for gold at his will and use it for his own purpose without a worry in the world.'

She was hopeless. There was no getting at her. And this

kind of argument was hardening her, so that the soft bloom on her face seemed often to disappear and leave it a silent, prim little visage, and her whole form became rigid and unbending, almost terrifying with the straight-laced uprightness of her high-class principles. And these principles being the accepted beliefs of society, he, the rebel out on bail, felt frightened of her, even as he was disgusted with her. And, out of this sense of inferiority, he tried to be more tender towards her, as if apologetic and anxious to win her back, so that he could approach her in another way, so that he could convert her through the connection of their senses.

But there was no mingling as they lay tossing on separate beds on the terrace through these breathless nights, while the black and lonely earth was covered by the lid of a massive, all-enveloping cloud in a deathly silence, while the entire caged creation moaned, pined and sighed for life, as it lay enshrouded on all sides in the clammy, ill-defined, streaming oppression of an unbreakable heaven. . . . What was it that barred them from each other? What was the root cause of this subtle hatred? For, on the surface, Maya was still that rare flower whom he had plucked out of Harbans Singh's garden, a flower which had been willing enough to be stolen. . . . Was it that she wanted to be planted in another garden, secure from all the ill winds? Perhaps that was the reason, perhaps she only wanted security and comfort, the lazy existence of a flower which wants nothing more than to live in the aura of its own glow, to change and grow old according to the seasons. . . . And what had a flower to do with the struggle? How could a vegetable know what human beings go through in the struggle for self-perfection, for growth? . . . Perhaps Maya could not understand this idea of growth, could not believe anything outside her own world, inclosed by her own desires, dead, but alive in her own indestructible hardness. Perhaps, as the Count had said, it was a question of two different words. . . . But he could not even touch her, take her hand, caress her, even teasingly. . . . And yet he was bound to her in a heartrending fascination, attracted to her by the magnetism of sheer opposition, as if his body was

taking a revenge on his soul by adopting this way to fulfil itself.

One evening from above the far-distant curve of the sky came a drove of clouds, scudding like a flock of dirty grey, unwashed sheep, daubed with patches of red and seemingly pregnant. . . . Gusts of air blew over the land like spurts of searing blast from an open-hearth furnace ; the earth seemed to murmur and sigh in its deeps ; hosts of crows flew as if they had drunk stale toddy wine; the cattle lowed as they waddled in and out of the ditches, now filled with dead leaves and rubbish; and lean cocks crowed on the rubbish heaps, noisy weather prophets proclaiming a change.

Towards the night the outer flanks of the besieging clouds started to the move closer, and the worshippers at the temple said that the hosts of Indra were advancing to relieve humanity from its confinement in the dungeons of woe and suffering.

At dawn a slight breeze burst through, so that the half-sleeping, half-waking world which had gasped for breath now filled its nostrils and stretched itself to embrace cool sleep. The pallor that the blasting heat had cast on Maya's face gave place to the tremors of a lightly blossomed rose. The trees, the bushes, the wild scrub sighed with relief and the birds sang a hushed note of satisfaction at the prospect of rain.

The rain was not long in coming. But it came with due ceremony. For, when the advance guard of Indra's army had surrounded the earth, the massive clouds in the middle of the sky swayed like mad elephants charging at the sky. Then came a cavalry whose steeds neighed thunder and struck lightning as they raced with iron hoofs across the roof of the world. And then the rain poured down, like the devout worshippers' notion of Indra's compassion, in streams and torrents, in a last ponderous downpour of blessings. . . .

Lalu and Maya scurried with their beds and bedsteads on to the verandah and walked out to the terrace to bathe in the rain. And, as if their senses, long pent up with desire, needed only the touch of the Monsoon to set them free, they were soon jumping and laughing and pushing each other in a child-like togetherness that made them forget the apartness of months.

The woods on the outer fringes of the Ganges glimmered like gold under the pale sheets of lightning, the northern hills echoed thunder and Mother Ganges ran down, swollen as in a flood.

And, on the banks of the river, men, women and children were rushing out, praying, squealing, screaming for joy, watching the beasts herding out and racing towards the water, watching the sparrow fluttering and chirping among the tamarind groves.

Plumes of rain on their heads, plumes of rain on their shoulders, cascades of rain running down their bodies into the large, exploding bubbles at their feet, Lalu and Maya began to run round and round. Suddenly he sought to chase her, while she ran, shrieking shrilly, resisting him, assembling the loose, silken folds of the baggy, tussore pyjamas she wore, drawing the soaking wet head-cloth over her head, as if his eyes would ravish her. Abandoned, forgetful of himself in the whirl, he caught her and snatched the head-cloth which disguised her desire in a deliberate modesty: In a moment it was she who was chasing him. Springing like a cat with her claws outstretched, unaware of the folds of her trousers, her bodice sticking to her bust and revealing, among the creases and the folds of her transparent clothes, the whole of her rounded lovely form, from the swaying hips to the purple nipples of her breasts, she grappled with him.

'Come, childling,' he called, 'come to the river and then you will get your head-cloth.'

'What, among those louts?' she said, and suddenly stopped short, self-conscious about the modesty of her exalted person again.

Smiling but pale at this answer, he threw her dupatta at her and went down the stairs.

Once outside the gates of the big house, he felt a resurgence of his disgust at his failure with her. Would they never meet? . . . Why, when there was time, did he not ravish her?

But the raindrops were falling and there was the noise of a teeming multitude from the temple.

Splashing the water, running, capering, he made towards

the riverside, but the temple lane was blocked by a crowd of naked worshippers who stood laughing and babbling excitedly as they gazed into the garden bower in the tamarind grove. Lalu craned his neck and saw a proud peacock which had lifted its tail and begun to dance. A mad dance it danced, beginning suddenly, sharply, with a jerk, as if it were sleep-walking. But soon it was rising and falling in subtle cadences, bobbing up and down, and wheeling about in a transluscent green washed clear by rain water.

For a few moments it danced and swayed, shining in swift, rhythmic circles, opening its plumes into a full form, closing them and reopening them, till the children screamed for joy and the older watchers moved their heads in admiration of the changing colours of its sheen.

Lal Singh stood spell-bound in a kind of childish rapture. For the bird seemed to typify the mood of the glorious, rain-washed morning as it held its head high, wheeled and then stamped the earth proudly as if it were the lord of creation.

'He wants a mate,' one of the peasants said. 'Gaudy, but he will soon come to grief when he sees that he has ugly feet!'

'But the brother-in-law's she-peacock has flown away somewhere,' said another. 'She is a gay bird. . . .'

The spectators laughed at this.

The peacock soon stopped, dipped its beak into its breast and began to tear his feathers, a ridiculous, ugly bird now with its extended black feet. . . .

Lalu Walked away towards the river for a swim. From the terrace of the river house came Maya's voice singing:

'Do not go my love,
Do not go in the month of rains . . .
Do not go . . .'

There are many moods in a court of law, for each man comes to court in a different mental state. Some are frankly frightened and think that the Judge will eat them; some are so cocksure and self-possessed that they feel they will deliver the best orations of their lives and smash the case for the prosecution to

smithereens; some are care-worn and anxious about their fate as if the magistrate was God Almighty, who had the power to consign them to heaven or hell with a word or a gesture; some are cool and defiant of the law because they have commissioned the attorney who is known to be a lover of the Judge's wife, or the Judge's son-in-law, or his bosom-friend since college days. This is true of most people appearing in the ordinary civil and criminal cases in India.

But in recent years new kinds of criminals were coming to the Kutcheris, called 'politicals.' Of course, to a great extent, these 'politicals' suffered from the same fears, doubts, misgivings, conceits and egotisms as ordinary human beings. But who says human nature does not change! The political revolution which had started since the war had brought a psychological revolution in its train.

As the lorry in which the ten accused of Kisan Nagar had journeyed from Partabgarh station pulled up by the busy carriage stand outside Partabgarh District Court, there was a sudden flutter of waving arms and scampering legs, and a huge crowd of peasants, who had waited for their heroes on the dusty fringes of the cross-roads, rushed and surrounded the vehicle with a yell: '"Bolo Kisan Sabha ki jai!"' As the heroes alighted from the motor, some more peasants led by Razwi, a fiery little student from the local college, broke the ring from the direction of the paved Mall Road and, eager, impetuous, excited, put garlands of flowers round the necks of the accused. Then there were shouts of 'Long live Comrade Lal Singh! Long live all the Kisan Brothers! . . .' And, as the procession advanced from the carriage stand across the little bridge which connected the cross-roads to the dusty courtyard, they were greeted in the arena, usually full of scribes who sat on raised platforms writing petitions for rustic litigants, by Kanwar Rampal Singh and Professor Verma, who had travelled by road and by the hundreds of peasant sympathizers who had gathered there since the morning.

At the first sound of a whisper the men sat up and strained to catch a glimpse of the exalted. For a moment, they seemed afraid lest the police or some other unknown horror should

burst upon them. Then someone gave a call and the men tore their throats as they shouted the various shouts of the Kisan Sabha and joined the procession, till the whole court-yard was a seething mass of pushing, pulling, babbling bandy legged humanity.

Lalu felt a tremor go down his spine at the sympathy of this crowd, and his face was flushed with the pride and embarrassment of being the centre of attraction as he stood to show himself, while the Count enjoined the men to wait outside the official ochre-coloured building in which the trial was going to be held.

The waves of self-awareness in Lalu seemed to evaporate, however, as a court peon cut short the Count's speech with an announcement demanding the presence of the Kisan Nagar accused in the court of Mr. Buckle, special magistrate, who had been appointed to try the case. They headed towards the verandah and entered the room in which they were to be tried. There was an almost tangible air of doom in the corridors of the Kutchery and in the cool, straw-tattied, cane-curtained shades of the tall rooms where the Sarkar's officials worked, the fear of the Sahibs' power which had been built up for generations into the pattern of this building, imposed through notices of 'silence' hung on its walls, and instilled into the imaginations of men through the legends of the Sarkar's disapproval of anyone not in a uniform, or not dressed in dignified English clothes or in sufed-posh whiteness.

At the first impact of the court room, full of superior figures, the accused stood back. But the Count signed to them to enter from where he and Professor Verma had taken up seats among the exalted.

As Lalu led the men towards the back of the room the frightening bluff of the first whirr of superiority melted before his eyes and disclosed the tall, blue-eyed figure of Mr. Buckle, the special magistrate, seated in a high chair on a raised dais, a handsome slim young precence in a tussore suit with shining, sleek fair hair, slightly ruffled by the air of the electric fan overhead. On his right-hand side was an array of the gentry of Partabgarh district, seated on office chairs, and on his left

were the public prosecutor and the Crown witnesses, including Captain Effendi, Mr. Topa, the Sub-Inspector of the Co-operative Bank, the chaprasi and the police.

The special magistrate was busy signing the files of a previous case, while a peon stood by him, and the court whispered in suppressed tones. Then there were vociferous shouts of greeting to the Kisan Nagar accused from the peasants outside and a frantic rush towards the court room.

Before Mr. Buckle could lift his head some police constables were already rounding the men up in the verandah and pushing them back.

The magistrate smiled nervously, finished signing the files and laid them aside, and then nodded to the public prosecutor, Rai Bahadur Raghu Nath Sahai, to begin. The prosecutor got up, a caricature of a tall, big-boned fat man, clad in a sack-like, high-collared alpaca jacket, with a heavy jowl over which fell the shadow of Harold Lloyd horn-rimmed glasses. He began to read out the charges against the accused, first individually against Lal Singh and Ram Din, for having assaulted Chaprasi Ahmed Din, then collectively against the ten accused for obstructing the constables from Nasirabad thana in the discharge of their duty and for taking part in a riotous assembly. Then he called the chaprasi to give evidence, though, before sitting down, he looked round with a beaming and raptured expression on his rubicund face, as if he were expecting acclamation for his great performance.

The gentry on the right of Mr. Buckle nodded and whispered to each other, till the magistrate, silent and gog-like, lifted his pencil towards the peon.

But the court peon was already calling for witness Chaprasi Ahmed Din.

Lalu wondered what Mr. Buckle was really thinking behind the mask of calm reserve which he wore. The Count had told him that Mr. Mehta, the Deputy Commissioner, was going to try the case. But, apparently, the landlords who had been accusing Mehta of partiality to the peasants had arranged to secure British justice with its natural bias in favour of landlordism and property. It was said, however, that this Sahib had

recently arrived from England and hadn't been got at by the older Englishmen in the service, who were all for keeping up the white man's prestige.

Ahmed Din came in, meek as a lamb, where he had come charging like a bull at Kisan Nagar, but with the assurance of one used to gliding about from office to office in the presence of Sahibs. He salaamed Mr. Buckle, then, in the absence of a witness-box, took his stand before the magistrate, and narated the story of how Mithu had refused to carry the luggage of Mr. Topa as soon as he had emerged from the village of Nanakpur, and how some men had halted by the cross-roads and sent one of them, Lal Singh, to belabour him with blows. . . . He proceeded to tell of the moment when he had reached Kisan Nagar with the constables of Nasirabad thana, so that they could charge the accused. But there was a rustling of forms behind him and Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari got up and objected to the witness tendering evidence on both the charges at once.

'Please let him proceed with the evidence,' Mr. Buckle said, making a weak gesture with his hand which did not disguise his impatience with the Defence Counsel.

Srijut Tiwari was, indeed, making a fool of himself and Lalu was afraid that he would ruin the case for them if he annoyed the Sahib.

The public prosecutor had not had time to raise his enormous frame in time to fight Tiwari's objection, but he got up and sought to fortify what Chaprasi Ahmed Din had said by elucidation of the two points by questions.

There was a hubbub outside, almost as if there had been a brawl going on, but the Rai Bahadur's voice rose above everything.

'The luggage contained books and the treasury of the Co-operative Bank, did it not?'

'Yes, Huzoor!' answered Ahmed Din.

'The accused Lal Singh threatened to and, in fact, took hold of the books and treasury of the Co-operative Bank, did he not?'

'Yes, Huzoor,' answered the chaprasi.

The public prosecutor looked round the court again, expecting to be congratulated for his subtlety and wit, and sat down.

At this stage the arena outside the court room seemed to have become a babel of shouts and squeals. And then, suddenly, some of the crowd with Razwi, who seemed to have assumed leadership during the short space of time since he had garlanded the accused, burst through the cordon of the police and rushed the door, crashing and falling on the threshold.

'This is absurd!' whispered Sheikh Hadayat Ullah from where he sat next to the Thakur Sahib of Nanakpur.

Mr. Buckle's face was a warm pink as he looked impatiently at the intruders. But he seemed too timid and nervous to do anything except smack his tongue disapprovingly at everyone.

Captain Effendi and some of the constables from Nasirabad, who were in the room, leapt to the door and began to push the men back, whispering the abuse they were generally used to shouting, handling the men with a cold anger, and yet unable to restrain themselves from employing their usual contemptuous method of keeping the 'low hooligans' in their places by kicking them on their backsides.

For a moment the magistrate watched this rough handling with a questioning look. Then he frowned. But, unable to decide quickly, what to do or say to restrain the peasants or the police, he peevishly ordered, 'Sit down!' whereupon Captain Effendi withdrew, breathing hard and white with anger and humiliation.

. The court was dumb at the words of the magistrate, but the noise of the rushing swarm smothered the tension and everyone turned with interest to the intruders, whispering and intent.

By this time Mr. Buckle was flushed red hot and perspiring profusely with the agitation of indecision.

The men did not enter too deep into the room, however, but merely sat down with one swift flutter of fear and excitement at the doorstep and beyond, in tiers, crouching, kneeling, half-sitting, half-standing.

Srijut Ladli Prashad Tiwari got up with an aggressive gesture of his head and began to question the chaprasi abruptly.

'What did the luggage consist of?'

Chaprasi Ahmed Din was taken aback by this onslaught and turned towards Mr. Topa, as if he were looking for paternal guidance and protection from his master.

'A hold-all?' Srijut Tiwari suggested.

'Yes,' the chaprasi answered.

'And a suitcase?'

'Yes, Huzoor.'

'And a tin of butter, two chickens and a basket of eggs which the villagers gave Topa Sahib?'

'Yes, Huzoor, mother-father!'

'Then, where was the treasure and the account books?' asked Srijut Tiwari, coming to the charge.

The chaprasi could not answer.

At this the flutter of fear and excitement which had gone through the crowd as they sat round the door became a nervous laughter. Lalu felt a revulsion for the men go through him for fear that they would ruin the case by rowdyism, specially as Mr. Buckle's enigmatic face gave no hint of what ultimate decision he would give.

'The counsel has no right to put answers to his own questions into the mouth of the witness,' the public prosecutor protested even as he strained to rise.

'Yes,' Mr. Topa shouted as he stood up from where he sat.

'Yes,' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah with a flourish of his arm as he too got up.

'I have finished the cross-examination, Mr. Buckle,' Srijut Tiwari said, twisting his pock-marked face into the swollen calm of haughty contempt. 'I shall call my witnesses when these gentlemen sit down.'

'Proceed,' said Mr. Buckle with a timid grin as he mopped the sweat on his neck with a white silk handkerchief which fluttered under the electric fan suspended from the ceiling.

Srijut Tiwari turned towards the accused and summoned Mithu. But the man hesitated and hung back.

'Make yourself a sheep and the wolf will eat you,' the Count whispered and disturbed the visitors' gallery. 'Go forward.'

'Why don't you go and prop them up, if you are so anxious to help your men, Kanwar Sahib,' burst out Mr. Topa, breathless.

'Just you wait!' said Sheikh Hadayat Ullah, swerving in his seat.

'I shall be pleased to hear your evidence later, gentlemen,' said Mr. Buckle with a polite show of force and a cutting glance at the gentry. 'Meanwhile, I want to hear the evidence of the accused. You will pardon me if I put first things first.'

'Tell us what happened when you were asked to bear the load?' asked Srijut Tiwari.

The man mumbled something and then looked at the exalted personages and hung his head down.

'Speak, why don't you speak?' bullied Srijut Tiwari.

'I promise that no one will kill you for giving information about the Co-operative Bank. I am sure everyone in that society is an honourable man and has nothing to fear from your evidence.'

Mr. Topa wriggled as he wiped the sweat off his face and his hands.

'Huzoor,' began Mithu. 'What to say! The co-operative society was formed in our village in the lifetime of the late landlord. The present landlord Sahib's son and the money-lender were appointed "sectaries" for this as well as for other co-operative societies. So when any Inspitar Sahib comes we are ordered to leave off milking our goats or ploughing the land and to do forced labour, bring a betal leaf from two miles away or transport a maund of luggage fifteen miles to another village. . . .'

There was laughter in the room at Mithu's awkward way of putting it. But, outside the court, there was enthusiasm at the miracle that one of them, a peasant, who was under arrest, had been bold enough to speak before the Sahib.

'Speak without fear,' Srijut Tiwari urged, now showing off with a vulgarity that seemed to Lalu to make Buckle Sahib purple. 'And tell me, when did you join the co-operative society yourself?'

'A year ago, Huzoor,' answered Mithu. 'A Burra Sahib

came and there was a meeting. On that occasion, as my ill-luck would have it, because I can read and count, they selected me to become treasurer of the society. Everyone said to me it was a great honour and I accepted the task. . . . But, Sahib, the heavens fell down on my head. One day the sealed chest which was kept at my place, and to which I had no key, was taken away by thieves, who pierced a wall at the back of my house. The landlord's son was angry and charged me with being an accomplice to this dacoity. But after everyone had touched his feet on my behalf I was let off, though my land and my house were sold to make up the money which they said was in the chest. When the Sub-Inspitar, Topa Sahib, came, I complained, but he said the Sectari Sahib was right. And they set me to lift his luggage to the next village. . . . Maharaj, is this justice? . . .'

'How much money did the book show to be in the chest?' asked Srijut Tiwari.

'Huzoor, they gave me no books, because the books were kept at the landlord's office,—they gave me the box, only to seal it!' said Mithu with a blunt courage which astonished the court.

'He is barking,' said Mr. Topa.

'Please keep quiet and let the case proceed,' said Mr. Buckle, stiffening with the highest excess of impatience that he had so far allowed himself.

There was a deep hush in the court at this, broken by a roar of '"Bolo Mithu bhai ki jai!"' outside.

Lalu trembled at these vibrations, afraid that in the moment of victory all would be lost: the pressure of men all round him was driving him to self-contemplation and to a vigilant scrutiny of the magistrate's face which had seemed tenser at the noise outside.

'Can he prove this?' the public prosecutor got up and asked. 'Because I am going to charge him with mishandling the books while he was treasurer.'

'There could be no mishandling of books, Sarkar, because there was no handling of them,' said Mithu, stubborn in his truth. 'Money is collected, but it is never mentioned in the

account books, so that members have to pay the same kist twice over.'

'And what about loans to members?' asked Srijut Tiwari, triumphant. 'Are they also not mentioned in the books?'

'They give loans to those who are the moneylender's own debtors,' said Mithu, forgetting to be servile.

'So the moneylender is both the Co-operative Bank and the moneylender!' exclaimed Tiwari. 'What a Co-op.!'

'Huzoor, the borrower never got the actual cash, as the loans granted were made to pay off the peasant's other debts to the moneylender,' added Mithu, as if his tongue were fetching out all the grievances he had stored up for years inside him.

'Strange, then do you mean that false entries were made in the books?' said Srijut Tiwari with a deliberate wink so as to press the point home.

'I don't know of any books,' said Mithu. 'No pass books were issued. . . .'

The public prosecutor could not bear it any longer.

'All this has no relevance to the first charge of assault,' he said, in slow, measured tones.

'I submit that it is very important to the defence,' Tiwari answered back, 'to show why forced labour is employed by the Inspectors of co-operative societies. . . .'

'I should like to hear more of this,' said Mr. Buckle, who now sat with his chin in his hands, interested in these revelations, which shocked all his notions about the success of co-operative credit societies that he had imbibed from Government propaganda, and which made him feel more like a spectator of this case rather than a judge.

'Then false documents must have been made to embezzle the money,' said Srijut Tiwari, summing up what had gone before with a short, self-satisfied belch. And he continued: 'Who do members go to for money? Is there no office of the Co-op.?'

'At the moneylender's shop, Maharaj,' answered Mithu.

'But if you knew of this state of affairs,' asked Mr. Buckle, in a slow, deliberate Hindustani, 'why did you not report to

the police or the higher officers of the district?' He seemed to regard the corruption in this particular Government Co-op. as an exceptional case and believed implicitly in the Pax Britannica, and that the police and the other officials were always there to prevent hardship to the people.

Mithu looked at the Sahib's face as if the magistrate were pronouncing his doom, and he became dumb, sinking into the safe shell of himself with a strange, abject grin on his face.

'They would be afraid of reporting things against their landlord and the moneylender, Mr. Buckle,' said Tiwari, 'especially to a man who requires them to do forced labour.'

'All the Inspitar folk of the Co-operative Bank are big Sahibs, Huzoor,' Mithu said, gathering strength from Srijut Tiwari's defence. 'What can we poor folk do?'

'I submit, sir, that this is all irrelevant,' said the public prosecutor, stirring himself to action again. 'The accused is charged, with Lal Singh and others, of assaulting Chaprasi Ahmed Din and . . .'

'I beg your pardon,' interrupted Tiwari in the politest Hindustani, 'but all this is not nonsense. Accused Mithu refused to do forced labour and accused Lal Singh helped to extricate him from the clutches of Chaprasi Ahmed Din.'

'"Bolo Srijut Tiwari ki jai!"' Razwi called. The mass outside took up the call like the waves of a pool in which some mischievous child has thrown a pebble.

Mr. Buckle looked up to catch a peon's eye, but couldn't see, as if he were in a whirl.

'What is more,' insisted Srijut Tiwari driving home the five points of his raised stubby fingers before Buckle and began to make a speech. 'The state of affairs the accused Mithu has described is well known to us. Only there are different methods of practising fraud upon the people. For instance, in the annual statement of the Co-op. in the village of Rajgarh, so Kanwar Rampal Singh tells me, figures were manipulated, accounts made to tally with the General Bank Accounts somehow, and dust thrown in the eyes of the members! So that from year to year the annual statements of the Co-ops. are fabricated. Then fictitious bonds are prepared as there is

no dread of supervision. This kind of fictitious rounding up of figures goes on! . . . No one dares to report the true situation. And it is not that members of the society do not understand the significance of the transactions, nor that they are not anxious to see them bettered, but because they are suppressed and the whole show is run by irresponsible officials for exploitation. The members of the societies are ordered not only to go nine to ten miles to Tehsil Headquarters to pay loans, but they are made donkeys for forced labour and beaten if they don't move. But donkeys, as you know, sir, are a stubborn race! . . .'

There was laughter at this unconscious humour, but Tiwari was in earnest and proceeded: 'Hence this case: I suggest that Chaprasi Ahmed Din assaulted the accused Mithu, and Lal Singh, when the latter tried to help Mithu. Later, Ahmed Din, with the help of his officer, fetched the police and started a riot at Kisan Nagar. . . .'

'Victory to Kisan Nagar,' Razwi gave a call enthused by Srijut Tiwari's speech and deeming the case already won. Beyond him the call rose on the tongues of the surging men at the mention of the word 'victory.'

'Stop that or I shall clear the court,' said Mr. Buckle, waving his hands in despair at his own weakness and the conduct of the crowd.

The public prosecutor rose and went on to say that the officials of the co-operative societies were not gods, that they were just teaching the peasants self-help, teaching them to stand on their own legs, that if the peasants did any service for them it was surely in the tradition of the country, specially as the officials always gave them bakhshish, and that the counsel for the defence had brought much extraneous evidence.

But the press of eager men at the door, impatient to know how the trial had ended, overshadowed the court and everyone's attention was distracted.

The public prosecutor protested against the noise outside.

'Keep the men back!' the magistrate ordered the peon sharply.

The peon ran to the door with nimble feet, but stood back

as if overawed by the grotesque and menacing shape of the crowd which hovered outside.

'I submit that the warrants against the accused be withdrawn,' said Srijut Tiwari angrily.

At this sudden challenge, Mr. Buckle's inner defence seemed to break down like reeds.

The public prosecutor was rising again to protest, but he was too late, for the crowd outside gave another call. Phewing hot breath, tormented and harassed as if by growing claustrophobia, Mr. Buckle lifted his head with a drawn face, shrugged his shoulders. Then with a solemnity that did not disguise his embarrassment he said: 'The warrants are withdrawn and the court will adjourn for the day.'

For a split second the room was charged with the malevolence of many unexpressed wills battling in a silent opposition. But an impetuous cry of 'Long live the peasants,' burst out from the lips of Lal Singh. And the burning hate of the factions burst out in the gentry's protests: 'This is not justice!' 'Sheer partisanism!' 'The proceedings were highly irregular!' only to be smothered by the shrill cries of 'Long live Comrade Lal Singh!' 'Long live the Kisans!' and by the stampede of inrushing peasants.

The men charged into the court like angry bulls, and scattered aimlessly up to the magistrate's table, glared at by the nobles and glaring.

'Long live Buckle Sahib!' they shouted at the instigation of the student Razwi.

Then they rallied to their friends and, with triumphant yells of 'Long live Lal Singh! Long live Kanwar Rampal Singh! Long live Verma Sahib!' shook the ceiling of the kutchery, lifted their heroes on their shoulders and led them out, where a seething mass was now jostling towards the exit.

Men struggled against each other to get nearer to leaders who were borne aloft, though each one of them was anxious not to hurt the other. They pushed and shoved each other and smiled. They shouted the usual calls and asked each other what had happened. And they converged eagerly towards the focal point of the procession where the shrill crescendo of the cries

of victory arose, and where gathered those who had defied the landlords and secured the release of humble kisans from the very clutches of the law.

A petition writer stood up on his platform and waved his arms at the crowd for raising so much dust. And the peons of the court shut the doors of the offices to prevent the intrusion of men and the noise. But the orgy of excitement, worked up through the calls, made the mass heedless of everything except the centrepiece of the procession. The police stood inside and outside the courtyard, vigilant, but helpless to do anything. For only a few palms in wooden tubs had been knocked over by the crowd in its exodus, otherwise there was nothing unlawful about the jubilant procession.

'I have a surprise waiting for you in the car,' the Count said to Lal Singh, after he had directed Ram Din to give the freed men a good meal before taking them back to Rajgarh.

Almost before they had got to the car which the Count had parked in the yard, Lalu guessed the surprise that was waiting for him: Maya. She had been more and more difficult; she would shut herself in during the days and she had begun to talk to herself in her sleep, often waking up in a sweat even when he was with her. And rather than comfort her he had looked like an assassin at her, frowning with the impatience of a guilt which was the compound of importunate regrets at having dragged her into a strange life, of his contempt for her, of the hundred agitations springing from his marriage to her, from a thousand affections of the heart arising from the onus of a connection which was shrinking into nothingness.

The sun cast blotches of light on the rubbish dumps which the solitary municipal scavanger was heaping up at short distances before the drum carriage should come to sprinkle the rutted road. And Maya sat with her face averted from the smell.

The Count hastened to the driver's seat and started the car, while Professor Verma nervously held the door for Lal Singh to enter.

Lalu followed Maya's gaze and laughed with the jerk of the car as it started. But the girl sat bent-headed with an edge of

her silken sari lifted to her nose, partly to ward off the dust of the road and partly to keep her weakness from overpowering *her*.

Now he suddenly felt a rush of tenderness for her. She must have been worried about the proceedings in the court. . . . And yet he was afraid of her emotions, for she was nothing else but a forest of emotions, intricate tangles of the most sensitive, clinging tendrils.

'Say, friend, did you like the special magistrate, your liberator?' the Count asked as he took the corner and entered the main road.

'It must be difficult for a weak administrator,' said Lal Singh. 'Torn between "British Justice" and the menacing shakes of the peasants.'

'Scarcity of men. . .' laughed the Count. And then he yawned and mumbled: 'It is difficult enough even for us who spend sleepless nights for love of notoriety and the care of our fellows not to be afraid of the masses.'

Lalu put his arm round Maya and felt the warmth of her flesh through her sequins, scented with the attar of roses. His hand touched the contours of her enlarging belley and he realized, what he had suspected for some time, that she was pregnant. Involuntarily he recoiled and withdrew his hand and, with a deliberate histrionic gesture of his head, looked away into the street.

A multitude of men in flimsy muslins and home-spuns were thronging the railway bazaar; the cross-roads were ablaze with the cries of hawkers and coolies who hurried with agile feet under the weight of luggage on their heads.

As he turned round he saw that the dramatic withdrawal of his caressing arm had had an instantaneous effect. There were tears in Maya's eyes, those tears which seemed to well up nowadays as readily as the smiles of former days. He sat back, perspiring and oppressed by the heat and the torture of her sensitiveness.

'We will look in at the Dak bungalow and have some tea,' said the Count as he swerved into the civil lines, away from the world of narrow lanes with worn pavements.

There was a discreet hush among the orchards of the English-style bungalows, pregnant with the invisible power of the Sarkar, and Lalu felt his heart palpitating at the sight of a policeman on point duty, as if he were a criminal, who had just escaped from jail.

'The Khansamah will give us cakes and pastries,' the Count said with a chuckle. 'And we will take some Pilsner Lager home — one misses such delicacies in the village!'

Professor Verma and Lal Singh both remained silent, but they were both thinking that if Gupta, the fool, had been here he would have just shouted the word 'bourgeois,' most effectively for they were always tempted by European luxuries, returning like dogs to their vomit, to the superior Sahib's life which they had abjured since they took up the cause of the peasantry.

The car slipped across the gravel, almost on to the rows of flower-pots which stood by the lawns of the Rest House. The brakes grated slightly. The Count blew the horn noisily. There was an utter silence, then vague noises of shuffling feet and an old Khansamah came, salaaming and arranging his turban with the red band.

'Ah, Qutb-ud-Din, we have come to tea!' the Count shouted gaily in an anglicized Hindustani.

'Salaam huzoor-caker-pastros allrety,' Qutb-ud-Din said, all in a mouthful.

The Count nodded and then led his friends towards the arm-chairs on the verandah.

The sun spread in a terrific glare on the white-washed pillars of the massive square bungalow from over the tops of the shaggy palm-trees which stood around the garden. So Qutb-ud-Din let down the huge cane curtains backed by canvas and turned the electric fan on.

Maya lay back in a heap in one of the great chairs.

'Love is making her head go round and round,' the Count jeered at Lalu, 'and you go about as if you live on another planet!'

Lalu was amazed as well as shocked at this. And he stood smiling sheepishly, somewhat apologetic to his comrades for introducing this complication into a complex enough struggle.

'Comrade Lal Singh,' the Count continued as if compelled by something inside him to ease the strain between them, and addressing Lalu, though he was talking at Maya: 'You wish for the courage of your deeds to impress her. Like most people, I expect, she knows that the world is full of horrible things. But what can she, a woman, do, who was never even allowed to show herself to the world! She believes that women are just made to suffer, that that is their birthright, their rôle in the world! . . . Her religion told her that people were born to suffer and she believes that God ordered the world as it is and no better. . . . Now, you mustn't blame her. She had been sufficiently disturbed by the restrictions on her life to burst the bonds of convention and run away with you. But the fear of generations lies heavily on us all. . . . So she resents the destiny that you have assigned her. . . . That is all I can say, except that you are a cad of the first order! . . . Only, when I come to think of it, who am I to tender advice to lovers. . . . Now you talk to her while Professor Verma and I wash our hands. . . .' After which the two dignitaries turned into the large dusty dressing room and disappeared into the recesses of the Dak bungalow.

Lalu felt grateful to the Count for talking at Maya. It was said that strangers should not meddle in the quarrels of husbands and wives, but for days he had felt that if only a third person, who had their interests at heart, could talk to her, the difficulties between them would evaporate. And Kanwar Rampal Singh had put it all so humorously that now there was nothing left to explain.

But Maya sat with the gloom of a thundercloud on her head.

'What is the matter, childling?' he said, patting her on the shoulder.

Maya sat up slowly, almost indifferently. Then she lifted her head and, staring at him with a glint of anger in her tearful eyes, said:

'Oh, why did you have to bring this on us!'

'Now what have I done?' he breathed impatiently.

Maya kept quiet for a moment, then averted her eyes from him and said: 'Some friends, these loutish princes of yours!'

'But what have they done?' Lalu said.

'Kanwar Birpal Singh, the younger brother of your friend, tried to "tease" me,' Maya said.

Lalu stood casual and undisturbed. Then he winced. . . . The thought came to him that he would not have cared if it had been Kanwar Rampal Singh. With a friend and comrade, he felt, he could share anything, because a comrade was least likely to come round and say afterwards, 'I did this to your woman.' And it wouldn't have mattered if it had been a complete stranger. . . . But Birpal Singh had ranged himself with the other landlords even against his own brother, and he had come to help Captain Effendi to arrest him, Lalu, and the others. And the Manager was a lecher. That he should steal upon Maya when he had put Lalu into the hands of the police—there was something despicable and slimy in that act. And to think that this cold stone was the brother of a diamond!

'And you? . . .' Lalu ventured, eager to know the worst.

'What could I do?' she said. 'I was alone and at his mercy.'

There is no rape except by the consent of the raped, and he glowed with rage against the woman. For a moment he watched her as if he could thereby elicit from her something which would comfort him, but her tear-washed face seemed merely to ask: 'Do you stil llove me?' And this reliance of hers on him only made him desperate, specially as the worm of doubt crept into his mind that the child she was carrying might not be his. In a flash, for the first time during the months of their life together, he felt that the connection between them had snapped. His trust in her had gone and a barrier had arisen between them which he could never surmount without resentment. It was almost as if by yielding to Kanwar Birpal Singh she had passed over to the opposite camp, the world of landlords and the police, the side to which she really belonged and which he hated. He wanted to leave her there on the verandah of the Dak bungalow and run, run far away from her, as if her once beautiful body were tainted. . . . And yet he knew that it was his pride which was

hurt, for really she seemed sad and penitent as she sat in the chair, with her head bent, her face shrunken and pale and suffused with a forlorn, haunting loveliness. He wanted to console her, to caress her, but he heard the rustling of soft-footed bearers in the dining-room and was afraid of being disturbed. And the moment during which he could relent was almost fading.

Just then Maya moved, wiped the tears from her eyes and face and turned her head away so that she seemed to be asserting herself. Then she arranged the head-cloth on her head, looked round, coughed and played with the arm of her chair and lay back as if she were absolutely indifferent about the past, a gentle, innocent, little animal made for happiness.

'The kind of rest houses which the Maharaja of Haripur had built in the hills,' she said, echoing back to the days of her brief married life with the man who had been chosen for her by her father.

Lalu did not know much about that phase of her life. And he was not interested in the decadent paradise of her past, in the corrupt, drunken world of the courtiers of Haripur as well as the solid, respectable household of her father. He wanted to think about the future,—was it possible for them to be together ? Especially as he was going to persist in his work, was bound to the struggle now more than ever. In the face of that this domestic wrong seemed paltry and insignificant. And since she had been the cause of this petty intrusion, he despised her and hated her. . . . He hovered over her, staring at her with wild, searching, angry eyes and then went and stood a little way away in the verandah. 'Was he jealous ?' he asked himself. And, on reflection, he found himself full of an insidious resentment against himself, against his own lowness.

'Why did you have to run away with me if you really wanted someone else ?' he said, turning to her with a half-insolent, half-pathetic flourish of his arms.

She sat there, demure yet unself-conscious, as if having made her confession she had washed off the guilt in her soul, like a child who forgets easily.

'Oh, childling, why you have to torture me so?' he said, and came towards her.

She looked up at him, smiling faintly, almost winsomely, then turned her gaze away.

He was tense now and intent on establishing a connection with her, as though he felt called upon to assert himself, to assert his right to her, so that he could thereby assert his manhood in his own eyes.

'Speak to me,' he bullied, and, then, he caressed her in a sing-song, 'Oh, do speak!'

And he wanted to touch her, to smother her with affection, to woo her back, longing to maintain his hold on her, wishing, hoping that she would change, that he would be able to recreate the world and win her over in the moment of victory, imagining, in an excess of enthusiasm, passion, naïveté and with the meekness of the humble, that the Revolution would be accomplished to-morrow or the day after. . . .

'Tea is served, Huzoor,' said Qutb-ud-Din from the end of the verandah where, according to his habit of walking softly for fear of the Sahib, he had emerged unawares.

VIII

There was no mistaking the singularly vivifying wave of proud self-confidence that spread among the peasants after their sweeping victory against the forces of law and order at the trial of the ten accused at Partabgarh.

In the early morning the next day, a host of them were gathered outside the Count's room, awaiting audience of the leaders. As Lalu came up from the river he could recognize the veterans, Raghu, Madhu, and blind Sukhua, seated in a position of importance on the steps of the verandah by the hero of the hour, Mithu, ex-treasurer of the Co-op. of Nanakpur.

'They let us off, because of my evidence,' the latter was vociferating, his round ball of a mouth puffed up so that it

seemed to be bursting with pride. 'That Buckle Sahib said little. He just listened, brothers, and I could see as I answered his questions that he was afraid of me. And that chaprasi,—he must be having diarrhœa! I tell you the Sarkar is afraid of our Kanwar Sahib. The whole kutchery watched in silence as the men bore him on their shoulders . . .'

'That chaprasi will put the sugar of poison in your mouth, one day,' said Sukhua in defence of chaprasidom and because, he felt his position in the peasant group shrinking in view of the new hero. 'It was for me that Kanwar Sahib started this agitation!'

'We should offer some food to the snake-god, brothers,' suggested Raghu, devout as ever. 'Because the day on which the police attacked us at Kisan Nagar was Nag Panchami day. And I had a dream that it is because we did not appease the snake-god that that chaprasi came, possessed by the snake-spirit, and beat us all up. . . . And we would not have been released if I had not promised the Nag in my dream that we would offer sweet rice and milk on his shrine if he possessed the Angrez Sahib and made him kind to us. . . . But for my prayers to God we would all be in jail now!'

'Rape the mother of your snake-god!' protested Madhu. 'The Sarkar is frightened of our fisticuffs!'

'Brother, do not blaspheme so,' appealed Raghu. 'Otherwise, the wrath of all the gods will fall on us again. Bhupendra's spirit also came and told me that we should offer worship to the snake-god. . . . I know the gods; they must have their dues. . . .'

'We are here to get money to buy some toddy wine to celebrate our victory,' said blind Sukhua. 'Not to talk of the dead.'

'To be sure, it is vain to spill milk on a snake-hole,' said Madhu. 'Our victory is due to the straight talk of the Vakil Tiwari Sahib, and our strong arms.'

'Why, Sahib, is drinking tari better for the soul or worshipping the snake-god?' Mithu asked Lalu as he approached across the palace courtyard.

'I am for tari all the time, brothers,' said Lalu. 'But who is the snake-god?'

'Maharaj, this Sukhua has been punished by God with blindness, but he will not forsake his heresies,' protested Raghu. 'And he wants to get drunk and pester Bhupendra's widow Sobha.'

'Ah yes, from of old God is the worker of miracles!' mocked the Count, who had been listening to their bravado, as he sat at breakfast with Professor Verma in the weak autumn sunshine of the verandah.

At first the peasants bowed their heads in silence. But in a moment, Raghu, usually so quiet, imagined that the prince agreed with him, and began seriously to explain the importance of making the offerings to the snake-god, saying:

'Vasuki, the great snake, is supreme, Maharaj. He it is who holds the world together. My father and my grandfather, and all our ancestors worshipped him. He is the force behind everything. . . .'

'How did he get such unlimited power?' mocked the Count.

'Mahraj, it is told,' Raghu said, rolling his eyes and pushing his torso forward as if he were throwing aside the sluggish restraint of his even nature, 'that Shankasur, the powerful and playful demon, pushed the surface of the earth in, Maharaj, as one might push a pumpkin in, or a rubber ball. The other demons and gods saw what had happened and set about putting things right.

'So the great Mount Meru was taken and placed in the ocean as a kind of churn.' At this he waved his arm and coughed and then continued. 'But they could not get a rope long enough to go round Mount Meru. So they begged Vasuki the great cobra to help them.'

'They might have asked you to spell a charm,' interrupted Madhu mischievously.

'Wrapping the snake round Meru, Maharaj,' Raghu continued, craning his head further forward, 'the gods got hold of the serpent's tail, and the demons held its head.

'And so began the churning of the ocean.'

'Even like the froth is churning in my mouth,' said Madhu.

'Go ahead, don't mind him,' the Count encouraged Raghu with a smile.

'And as they worked, Maharaj, not only did the earth rise again, but the nine gems, Hira, Manak, Moti, Nilum, Spithk, Turmari, Pola, Lasniya and Pusha-praja came to the surface. And, along with them appeared Luxmi Devi, the goddess whom Vishnu took for a wife; also, the ten-trunked elephant, a horse, the elixir of life, Vish the poison, the sun and the moon. . . .' He was pronouncing each name with the devoutness of a priest, as if the faith of a lifetime had at last found its proper accent. Now the God divided all these between themselves, but there was trouble about Vish, the poison. No one seemed willing to take it. . . .'

'No wonder,' interrupted Madhu the sceptic. 'For poison is not ambrosia.'

'At last, Maharaj, Siva, the god of the cremation ground, drank the cup,' continued Raghu, wrapt. 'Just as he had done so, Huzoor, his body began to burn. He put the moon on his head to cool it, and summoned the Gangés to wet it, but it was of no avail. So he caught the huge cobra, Vasuki, and wrapped it round his neck to cool his burning throat, for the tail of the snake-god is very cool. This relieved Siva and, once again, the snake-god, proved to be man's friend. . . . To be sure, it was the snake-god who put kindness into the mind of the Magister Sahib, Maharaj. . . . We did not do the last puja and I say we should offer a cotton wick in clarified butter to him, while this rape-daughter Sukhua here, is all for drinking tari. . . .'

'Maharaj,' protested Sukhua angrily as he did not want Kanwar Rampal Singh to know that they had come there to ask for money to buy tari with. 'We want to celebrate our victory, not to offer milk and turmeric to the gods! What have the gods done for us? Have they saved us from eviction? Did they save me from being blinded? Did they save us from the hands of the police? Why should we spend the money you donate to the priests? We want to drink some wine and be happy, because, as brother Madhu says, our own fisticuffs have brought us victory!'

'In that Sukhua is right!' said Lalu. 'To be sure, victory or defeat depends on our own fists.' But as he said so he felt

drawn to the religious Raghu, whose story-telling reminded him of his own godly father, even as his social conscience was driving him towards Sukhua, embittered by his own pettiness.

'Drunkards and braggarts!' Raghu shouted.

'And why should I be sober?' Sukhua reiterated, almost tearing the bandage from his eyes to see his enemy. 'For Bhupendra's widow, Sobha, who will not even lead me about on the roads? For Bhoori Singh, the watchman? Or will you buy me a couple of bullocks if I remain sober? Or will you make me a chaprasi if I show good conduct? Will you give me back my eyesight? . . . I am content to be a drunkard!'

'Acha, so you have begun fighting about the money long before I have said I will give you any!' teased the Count.

'As if the Judge will not do justice, but he will let you come to the house,' said Professor Verma to assure them that the bakhshish would be forthcoming. For, whatever else he felt about the Count, he knew that Rampal was generous in the extreme, having given him hospitality for months together in spite of the fact that his social conscience seemed to him growingly to become a compensation for the weaknesses of his rather enlarged ego.

'Maharaj, to be sure, one must sympathize with the evicted tenants,' said Mithu patronizingly. 'I have a bit of land and if I had not been implicated in this Co-op. Bank I should not even have got into debt with the moneylender, or been beaten by the chaprasi. . . . But things are not so bad in Nanakpur as in Nasirabad. Our landlord is a kind man even though his son is a rascal. Though we never see the old man, because he lives in Benares, whenever he comes home he feasts the whole village on fried bread and sweats. . . . And because I can lift a wooden dumb-bell of several maunds, the landlord is afraid of me and specially kind to me. But I have heard that in the other estates there are landless labourers who strip off leaves and boil them for broth, who dig the stakes of turnips out of the landed tenant's earth at night and snare jackals to eat, who poach on anything they can find. So these brothers, here, who have been forced off their lands, deserve all the sympathy they can get. I will myself stand by them in the future!'

'Why don't you give them bits of land on your estate?' said Lalu to puncture the bubble of Mithu's complacency. He sensed that, in spite of their just victory against the law, the man who had the land among them had not lost his patronizing attitude to the landless labourers.

'Oh, Huzoor, the land allotted to me is a few sandy acres,' raid Mithu, smiling lamely. 'And, nowadays, there is not enough land to go the round. And I am in debt. But, Huzoor, you cannot say that I did not do my best for them in the court!'

'I should have thought,' said Kanwar Rampal Singh, 'that if you could frighten Buckle Sahib into submission and that chaprasi into a bout of diarrhœa you could persuade the Raja Sahib of Nanakpur to give you someone else's land!'

'I only exist by your grace, Maharaj,' said Mithu, relapsing into a humility which was the other side of his pugnacity. 'Who am I?'

But the Count was sorry to have humbled him, because he would rather that they developed high opinions of themselves than that they remained spineless worms withdrawing into their own shells at every shadow of the clouds.

'Now you are becoming afraid of me,' he began with a laugh to reassure him. 'Whereas, really, a moment ago, you had succeeded even in frightening me.' Realizing, however, that this foolery would only embarrass Mithu and the other peasants, he changed the subject: 'I have some land which I want ploughed up soon; who wants to work on it?'

'Maharaj, Maharaj,' a chorus of voices immediately rang out from the more docile and silent members of the crowd at the back. And then an obscure, middle-aged man with a sparse moustache got up and, joining hands, came forward, as if he were sleep-walking, and fell at the Count's feet.

'He is Gautam from Nanakpur,' Mithu introduced him. 'He had to borrow money from Seth Bapat, the moneylender, to secure his crop last year. Because his holding was small, ever since his brothers parted from him, and as his wife breeds a new child every season, he had to borrow more. So he pledged the year's crop before it was green. Now the debt is

not paid and the interest on the debt has mounted up. And Bapat has started proceeding against him. . . .'

'Maharaj,' Gautam began, encouraged by Mithu's words, as he brushed his moustache though he still knelt before the Count. 'The seed of an owl of that Bapat is near enough to death, but he will not relent. When it comes to paying a price for the wheat or lentils, he casts aspersions on the quality of the grain: "Partly the wheat is damp, partly the pin is loose," he says. But when it comes to giving a loan, he behaves like a virgin on the first night with her husband. . . . I have nowhere to go, so perhaps you will let me work on your estate. . . .'

'The trouble with this Thakura, Huzoor,' asked Mithu, 'is that he did not take the law into his own hand and go and sell his harvest to dealers in the town, but waited like a lamb to be eaten up by the landlord's son and Seth Bapat . . . . I could have shown them my mettle if I had had to deal with them.'

'Why did you not do so!' blind Sukhua said, jealous of all other claimants on the Count's sympathy. 'Now you all come like a flood on Kanwar Sahib's estate and want to take the bread out of our mouths.'

'God is the giver,' said Raghu charitably. 'Let them come, they are welcome.'

'With only one field ploughed up, there is not even enough for a mouse to nibble at yet,' said Sukhua grasping.

'Aji, give them the money for tari before there is a fight over my stony acres,' the Count said, turning to Ram Din. 'And Lal Singh will see to it that they plough up the whole of the land attached to Kisan Nagar after their celebrations.'

The surprising thing was that they did not merely talk big, and quarrel with each other, but, backed up by a dim yet obstinate awareness of the new fact which they had learnt that they had certain inherent rights as men, they began actually to act, to make the Revolution!

A rally had been called in the village of Bansi near Nanakpur to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The leaders, whose ranks had been strengthened by the arrival

of the fiery student leader Razwi, motored up about four o'clock in the afternoon, expecting, as usual, to find the peasants already gathered there and waiting for them. But, apart from a few local tenants, and some of the men who had walked up from Rajgarh, there was no one from Nanakpur present.

Professor Verma, who had always felt happier talking to a few individuals than to a mass, was all for proceeding with the meeting. Razwi, who was bursting to make a speech, agreed from the other extreme. But Lal Sing, whose duty it had been to organize the meeting, felt conscience-stricken at so poor a gathering and looked anxiously towards the road from Nanakpur.

There was not a sign of a human being, however, on the solitary wayside among the harrowed fields, shadowed by the dull yellow foliage of trees, dappled here and there by the afternoon sun. Only some squirrels played about among the holes, the ruts, the gnarled roots and on the bare ground under the trees strewn about with leaves as though covered by a carpet of dead gold.

A little later two railway coolies, in their blue tunics and turbans, showed up from the direction of Bansi station. When they reached the grove where the meeting was to be, they made straight for the Count, joined hands and stood dumbly before him.

'Say, friend, what is the matter?' the Count asked them airily, thinking that they had probably come to ask his help in making a petition for more pay or something.

'The Station-master Sahib has called you, Maharaj,' said one of the coolies, a foxy, undersized man.

'What does he want with me?' said the Count. 'If he has asked me to dinner to celebrate the death of his wife I shall come.'

'Huzoor, some of your men are there?' said the second coolie, a large, uncouth but open kind of man.

'Maharaj, it is that Mithu of Nanakpur who fancies himself as a leader, I am sure,' said blind Sukhua from where he sat in a place of honour as one of the martyrs of Kisan Nagar.

'To be sure, he talks more loudly than Sukhua,' said Lalu,

who was opening bundles of *Naya Hind* with Ram Din under the direction of Professor Verma.

'Why are the men held up at the station?' Lalu asked the railway coolies.

'We don't know,' lied the foxy coolie.

'They have come without tickets, Huzoor,' said the second coolie.

The Count could not help bursting into a fit of laughter at this.

'It is a serious matter if they begin to take the law into their own hands,' said Professor Verma.

'Aji, can the jackals kill the buffalo, Professor Sahib!' said Razwi.

'Step into that car,' the Count said to Lal Singh, 'and let us see about it, lest the respect for law and order may get the better of us all!'

Professor Verma seemed relieved that the Count had not asked him, for he did not want to be implicated in this business. So he stayed to preside at the meeting and Razwi began to speak, while Kanwar Rampal Singh and Lal Singh sped towards Bansi station, with the two coolies squeezed into the back of the car.

Hardly had they covered the half a mile to Bansi station and pulled up by the siding, when a concourse of peasants, who had been seated under the surveillance of the Station-master, the sweeper of the station, and a solitary village policeman, ran across the lines with cries of 'Long Live Kanwar Rampal Singh' and 'Long live the Revolution,' while the officials chased them.

As the Count and Lalu got out, they found that it was not the Station-master, or the sweeper, or the police, who were indignant, but the peasants who vociferated about the injustice of not being allowed to go to the meeting. And, of course, Mithu, the hero of the trial, was the ringleader of this 'Revolution.'

'The meanness of these country officials Kanwar Sahib' he said. 'They think that what is bought comes cheaper than what is taken as a gift!'

'To be sure, what is stolen comes cheaper than what is bought,' said Lalu, amused yet disconsolate at this cheating.

'But, truly, their mendacity has reached the limit, Huzoor,' said another peasant.

'As Mithu says, they are our trains.' Yet another peasant echoed the gospel of Revolution.

'Kanwar Sahib,' began the station-master, lifting his joined hands, 'I implore you. . .'

But Mithu shut him up by saying.

'Go, go, the old days of Sarkari Raj have gone, now it is peasant Raj, exactly as it is in Roos.'

'Oh, let him talk,' said the Count to whom all this effontery was great fun, not only because it appealed to his sense of humour, but because he was exhilarated to see his preaching in practice.

'But Maharaj,' said Mithu, 'the Station-master of Nanakpur is not our father-in-law; if he let us all board the train without tickets, why should this guardian of a three-yard platform like Bansi station refuse to let us out. . . .'

'I will lose my job, Huzoor,' appealed the Station-master of Bansi, falling at the Count's feet.

'Die, brother-in-law, your end has come!' bullied Mithu, drunk with the idea of Revolution. 'Why, even the afsars at Partabgarh Station allowed us to travel without tickets, after our trial!'

'Silence!' said the Count with a sharp gesture of his hand, as he raised the Station-master from his feet. But he could not screw his face into solemnity at so absurd an application of his gospel.

Some of the peasants were known to have charged the platform at Partabgarh station after the trial, and they had been allowed to travel by kind railway officials, who understood the excitement of so remarkable an event as the vindication of the peasants in a court of law. But, apparently, they were making a habit of it. The age-old instinct for thrift of the peasantry had combined with their idea of Revolution, and, for once, they had found a means by which they could get something for nothing.

'I could excuse them if they had travelled a hundred miles without tickets, because they are poor,' said the Station-master. 'But to ride five miles when they could have walked, and to give a chance to the Station-master of Nanakpur to tell upon me and get me out of my job, Maharaj . . .'

'Don't whine so,' shouted a woman, half emerging from the jute sack-cloth curtain of a red-brick house in the station yard. 'Let them go and shut the chickens up before the night comes on!'

'Now, look Kanwar Sahib, even his wife is on our side,' said Mithu.

'Has it occurred to you,' the Count said to the Station-master, 'that you might ring up Nanakpur Station and ask them why these men were allowed to get on to the train without ticket?'

'Maharaj, I am sure to be dismissed if I dare to disturb the Station-master there. He has already threatened to report me.'

'But if he allowed these kisans to board the train without tickets,' said the Count, 'then . . .'

'Let us go and telephone him,' urged Lal Singh, impatient to get the men off.

'Of course, we greased his palm with the few annas we could collect from among the thirty or so men,' informed Mithu. 'And he may not talk straight now for fear of being found out.'

But the Count disappeared into the office, followed by the Station-master.

'The brother-in-law is frightened,' said Mithu.

'Don't you feel frightened?' Lalu mocked, the prig in him glaring at Mithu with a light that was fierce and searching.

'To be sure, not under the shadow of your protection,' answered an old man.

Indeed, as Lalu looked round at the peasants he saw that a conspicuous change seemed to have been wrought in their persons. He peered hard at them to see if he were not merely imagining this, or whether the light was not playing tricks with his vision. But no,—though the Revolution had not lengthened their legs, or broadened their chests, or straightened their

torsos, it had certainly made their faces glow with beaming smiles where there used to be long vacancies.

Presently the Count came back, with the Station-master running little capers ahead of him, abject and apologetic.

'The Station-master of Nanakpur allowed these men to get on the train without tickets in "the interests of public order,"' reported the Count. 'He was afraid of a riot.'

'Did I not say to you, brother-in-law!' Mithu said to the Station-master.

'Those hens will be lost in the forest!' shouted the Station-master's wife. . . . 'Go, all you rustics, don't make such a noise outside my door . . . . whoremongers!'

'Now, you will be all right once you get into bet with her,' said Mithu. 'But we shall have to walk half a mile . . .'

'Not to speak of the shame you will feel when you look us all straight in the face,' said the Count, leading the men away while the Station-master made a long, low obeisance to him.

At the meeting that day rebukes and admonitions about the preservation of discipline formed part of every harangue about the glories of the Russian Revolution.

But the courage and self-reliance of the peasantry could not be remedied by all the lectures about discipline and the sense of responsibility necessary to bring about the Revolution.

After the incident at Bansi railway station, early one morning, the tenants of the Kisan Nagar colony were waiting in the courtyard of the Rajgarh palace, presumably to see the Count.

The leaders had not yet finished their chota hazri. They had slept late after the fatigue of a rally in distant Patti the previous evening, and they listened to the hum of the deep voices outside even as they sipped their tea.

'Where were you yesterday, Oh, Sangal?' Madhu asked the boy who had found employment as a messenger in the office of Kanwar Birpal Singh through Gupta, who had at length sold his conscience to the estate manager in lieu of enough money to pay the dowry of his eldest daughter.

'I went to town to fetch some nector for the Manager Sahib,' replied Sangal as he came and sat down with his old cronies,

trying to be a grown-up among grown-ups, puffing at the common hubble-bubble.

'You ought to have been at that meeting, salé!' blind Sukhua said. 'Wah, that student from Lucknow spoke from my heart.'

'What did he say?' Sangal asked.

'Oh, what wisdom these yougsters have!' Sukhua began, angling with his outstretched hands for the hookah. 'He took off the curtain and revealed to me the new age in which we are living. And though I have no eyes now, I could see glimpses of wonderful days to come!'

'You are accursed,' said Sangal. 'And the only glimpses of heaven which you will have will be through other people's eyes. . . . I saw a circus in town yesterday.'

'O bey, born of a bitch, I was not talking of the heaven beyond the earth,' Sukhua protested as he grappled the stem of the hookah from Raghu and pulled a whiff. 'There is something strange happening in the world to-day, Razwi Sahib told us. There are signs that the world will not have enough bread, because the Sarkars of the world have been burning wheat in order to keep the prices up. And now, since the drought has ruined all the peasants, and heavy rains have kept off the sun, the wheat ear will produce little flour, and there will be a shortage of bread. . . . We were like babes trying to toddle on a platform of prosperity and falling down every time we climbed. But now mother earth is coming to give us a push and we will soon be on top. No more will starving peasants go to the towns to beg, but they will flourish on green lands.'

'Ram re Ram, how you lie!' said Raghu. 'The student said that the end of the world is in sight. He said that God will soon send a drought which will turn the rich loam of fertile lands to sand if the Sarkars of the world do not help the peasants. . . .'

'These two do not understand,' added Madhu. Razwi Sahib said that the Sarkar spreads false rumours about dearths to raise prices!'

'Pass me the hookah,' Sangal said impatiently. 'I have to go

and clean the office and there is going to be a feast in our part of the palace to-night. Babban Jan, the courtesan, is coming to dance.'

'Do work or leave it undone, in the house of pleasure it is all one,' said Sukhua, leaning towards Sangal and spitting some phlegm. 'But talk of earth is good for a peasant's son.' . . .

'What of the earth?' Sangal said. 'Everyone has his place. . . . The Manager Sahib says he will make me his bearer when I grow up.'

'There will be a change of places in the new world,' said Sukhua wheezily. 'There will be no master and servant! So said that Razwi Sahib. They are going to put an end to this Sarkar.'

'And blind Sukhua will be king of Hindustan!' mocked Sangal.

'Don't blaspheme, owl!' Raghu taunted. 'Gandhi Mahatma will be king, and the salt tax will be withdrawn.'

'Fools, there will be a Revolution!' said Madhu.

'Revolution my lund!' exclaimed Sangal. 'I am going to be bearer to the Manager Sahib. Then I shall marry the very youngest daughter of Bania Gupta.'

'Go, brother-in-law, Sheikh Chilli!' shouted Sukhua, spitting out more phlegm that had charged up to his throat. 'You should be ashamed of your manhood.'

'But tell me what good has come of all the talk about Revolution?' Sangal said. 'For months those leaders have talked. But have the landlords taken the evicted tenants back or failed to recover rents? You who believe the promises of those fellows, who drink warm tea and sleep in milk-white beds, always have to bear the brunt of the danda!'

'They have big hearts and give generously,' said Sukhua. 'And they teach us to take an eye for an eye. To be sure, even a mother will not give to her child without being asked. So we have to challenge the landlords and the Sarkar!'

'But look at Ram Kumar Misra, the printer,' said Sangal. 'He was made treasurer of the estate. And Bania Gupta got money from the Manager Sahib.'

'Ah, but their spirits are exhausted, son,' said Raghu. 'And men will spit at them for deserting us. But the shouting we did yesterday at the meeting opened our lungs and our hearts.'

'And Sukhua is right,' added Madhu. 'We must stone the eagles who sit on the lands.'

'It requires manhood to talk like that,' said Sukhua jocularly. 'This Sangal is like a girl, gandu, Sala!'

'Rape the mother of your Revolution!' shouted Sangal. 'Shut up!'

'What is this chain chain, early in the morning,' the voice of Kanwar Birpal Singh, the Manager, came from the right wing of the palace.

'Go salé!' Sukhua struck out blindly with his arm and caught Sangal on the neck. 'Go to your uncle, the Manager! We will show you something when the day of reckoning comes!'

The thupper hurt Sangal's feelings, so that he got up and retaliated by getting hold of the blind man's goatee and by hitting him on the head.

But blind Sukhua caught hold of Sangal's long hair and held him, shouting:

'Rape-mother! Stripling of an upstart! Swollen-headed fool! Have you forgotten your origin!'

At this Kanwar Birpal Singh ran up and began to wrest his new servant out of Sukhua's grasp, saying:

'Blind donkey! You have forgotten your origins too, fool! Let him go!'

Without more ado, Sukhua swung his hand in a circle and gave Kanwar Birpal Singh a resounding slap.

The Manager had not suspected such daring on the part of a ryot and was completely taken aback. Then he charged at the blind man, and Sukhua tottered and fell.

'Get out of here! Get out!' he shouted, kicking the blind man.

But Sukhua grimly struggled to rise and, catching hold of the Manager's leg, felled him with a diabolic swiftness and struck at him with the stalk of the hubble-bubble in his hand.

'The old days have gone,' he kept saying, waving his hand as if the world had dissolved into insubstantial nothingness.

'The old days have gone! . . . Lecher! You go attacking other people's wives I will teach you a lesson!'

Raghu, Madhu and Sangal tried, anxiously, to rescue the Manager from where Sukhua now sat on him, while the noise of the scuffle brought the Count, Professor Verma, Lal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi running to the compound.

'Oh, leave go, bright eyes!' shouted the Count.

'Separate them,' called Professor Verma. 'Don't let us stand aside while this lout is hitting Kanwar Sahib!'

Two stray dogs rushed barking at the crowd and the men shouted, while clouds of dust arose from where the Manager struggled furiously to release himself from Sukhua's grasp.

For a moment, the quarrel raged at a furious tempo and everyone stood in the changeless stillness of a suspense, concentrated, as if hypnotized by this phenomenon.

Then Lal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi dragged the blind man away.

Kanwar Birpal Singh hung his head down in shame and muttered abuses under his breath as he brushed himself, livid with shame and fury at the unbecoming spectacle he had made of himself. 'I'll show you a thing or two! Dogs!'

'Go, you seducer of other people's wives! You dare not face us! Lecher!' Sukhua answered, a trickle of blood flowing from his teeth into the froth on the corners of his mouth.

And the war of words would have flared up anew, but Ram Din and Lalu dragged the ryots away.

'Curious folk, these peasants!' the Count laughed by way of an apology for his amusement at the men's behaviour after they had been calmed, slightly rebuked, and despatched to Kisan Nagar. 'So deep has the gospel entered into their hearts and imaginings that they are beginning to practise it literally.'

'Do you realize where all this is leading to?' Professor Verma said from the sullen silence into which he had fallen since he saw the undignified tussle between the Manager and the blind man. 'The whole countryside is becoming hysterical. Those peasants! . . . You should at least try to be serious

when they attack your own brother! I could understand the men's enthusiasm after the trial, but . . .'

Indeed, he had been happy enough to see that an abject, demoralized, down-trodden peasantry had lifted their heads for once, but he had been insisting that they should concentrate on the demands he had drawn up, and lead the movement cautiously, though he himself did not know how to lead it, or where.

'If my brother happens to be in the landlord's camp, and a philanderer and a bully to boot, shall I make an ass of myself by defending him against my own comrades!' The Count was smiling, even more embarrassedly than he had done at the first sight of the ridiculous fight.

'Then, it seems to me,' said Verma, seeking to control his voice from rising above a merely bored, conversational level, and keeping his eyes averted, 'this movement is becoming unscrupulous and devoid of any sense of decency. . . . . And we seem to be running it entirely to indulge our personal fancies. . . .'

'If you want to suggest that I am exploiting this struggle for my own nefarious purposes,' said the Count, hurt at Verma's insinuation, 'then I must perforce plead guilty. Comrade Sarshar has often told me this. And maybe I like Leadership . . . . But knowing that my younger brother is a mental light-weight, I am not afraid of him. May I suggest, however, that your respect for him, for the Congress Leaders, and even for law and order, is mere petit-bourgeois philistinism!'

'I do not believe in hooliganism!' exploded Professor Verma. 'After all, there must be some consideration of sentiment and respect for one's relations.'

As he said this he regretted losing his temper. For, inside him, he realized that what the Count had charged him with was perhaps true enough. His father was a clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, and his mother an illiterate woman from the goldsmith's caste. Perhaps he had an inferiority complex. Certainly he was timid. But he had always thought of this trait in his character as the gracious

modesty which accrued from his refinement and education rather than as an inherited sense of fear.

There was a hateful silence after these insinuations and insults had been uttered.

Lalu could see that both the friends were hurt at having attacked each other and aching to establish a connection across the barriers that had arisen between them. And yet they stood about, their faces warm with a touching wistfulness. He found himself more and more inclined to the Count. For he himself was biased against Kanwar Birpal Singh, not only because the Manager had insulted him, but because of what he had done to Maya. In fact, this quarrel had centred round the incident of Birpal Singh's approaches to Maya. Lalu did not know how the peasants had got to know about it, but Sukhua had called the Manager a lecher even as he had struck him blow after blow. This tickled Lalu's vanity and almost seemed to heal the pain which he had felt since Maya confessed to him at the Partabgarh Rest House. He also vaguely guessed that Kanwar Rampal Singh's unconcern on seeing his brother beaten by Sukhua was partly due to the Count's sympathy for him, Lalu. Politically, too, he was prejudiced in favour of Kanwar Rampal Singh, because, though he had not known the exact motives the Count had in his adherence to this peasant movement, Lalu thought this to be as natural an impulse as the desire for self-glorification that he himself had at odd times suspected in himself. And the word 'hooliganism', which Professor Verma had hurled at Kanwar Rampal Singh, had stung him, the paid agitator, even though he had a secret respect for Professor Verma's learning and shared the fears of the dignitary, even as he shared with the learned man a humble origin from which 'petit-bourgeois philistinism' was said to spring. . . . Except that, with his natural kindness for himself, he felt that the appellation described the queer little Professor more appropriately than it applied to him. Verma seemed to be shut up in the world of his books, he seemed to withdraw and shrink from all contact with men, and to suffer from the futility of the intellectual who had read so much, thought so much, and cancelled out each thought and each belief against

another so thoroughly, that he had no belief left at all. . . . It was true that the Professor had attached himself to the Count's campaign. But, throughout, he had had to be pushed forward against his will. It took him a long time to make decisions, as if he were afraid of something happening, even though he had allied himself to a movement which meant to do things, as if he were really afraid of change and secretly clung to the old life through sheer fear of action, always hesitating, doubting, uncertain and pitiable in all his wisdom, alone.

'Professor Sahib,' the student Razwi began in a conventional respectful tone which was belied by his blatancy, 'I would like to ask you one or two questions. It is only "hooliganism" when the peasants lift their hands? Is it not "hooliganism" when the landlords or the police beat them up, or when the landlords, using the machinery of University rules, rusticate me for no other crime than organizing a Socialist club in the College? Is not the Government of India committing "hooliganism" daily on the people? Why not protest against that "hooliganism" a little? it seems to me that it is nothing else but organized "hooliganism" for those Viceroys and Governors to hold their wonderful garden parties within the walled compounds of Government Houses, with Indian money, while our kisans, Salé, go trudging barefoot on the roads as if the invisible stave of poverty was goading them on from behind. . . . It is a mockery, the whole show! And why can't we pull this tawdry array of courtly splendour to pieces? Why is violence unthinkable and undesirable against those who do violence to us? If the English declare that they won India by the sword and by the sword shall they hold it, why can't we say that we shall win India back by the sword and by the sword shall we keep it! . . .'

'I think revolvers are better adapted for all these noble purposes than swords, Razwi!' mocked the Count. 'Besides, they are more appropriate for use by hooligans and gangsters.'

'Oh, it is no use talking to you,' said Professor Verma, toying impatiently with the cord of his dressing-gown. 'If you won't see that it is a question of values . . . Violence brings

with it the dead weight of selfishness and animality, parts of our human inheritance which we should try to outgrow.'

'Ah, if you put on such lofty airs . .' said Razwi, stirred by the contempt in Professor Verma's voice.

'Don't be a fool,' the Count soothed Razwi. 'It is only Professor Verma's manner. . . . But mysticism, whether of violence or non-violence, is a disintegrating force.'

No one understood what the Count meant by this remark.

'But, Maharaj,' said Ram Din, the rough, 'however you Sahibs may talk, the peasants are only impressed by deeds.'

'Indeed, where have theories led our elders to in the past?' said Razwi. 'My father is a doctor in Government service. He was shocked by the atrocities at Amritsar. But he would not resign from service. He rationalized his rôle in life by an extraordinary doctrine: "I know things are bad," he said, "but we must be patient and suffer all these insults and humiliations at the hands of the Sarkar, because soon Gandhiji will set things right. And then we will enter upon a new epoch. . . ." Meanwhile, my respected father lives suspended somewhere between the old life and the new life in a life which is no life at all, because he is fifty-five and is getting ready to die. And that real life he has vaguely hoped for will never begin for him. I admit I have not the patience to wait for the dawn of the new era, because, having been rusticated from college, I have no future before me until India is free. . . . And I don't think those other have-nots, the peasantry, can wait either. . . . So I can dispense with compromises. . . .'

'Freedom, brother, is yours when you begin to talk and think as you do,' said Kanwar Rampal Singh. 'It does not fall like manna from heaven. Liberty consists in the awareness of our slavery and in the struggle to abolish the slavery. . . . And, of course, I agree with you that the end justifies the means, but . . .'

'But what?' Razwi shouted, with the scowl of the fanatic on his face, 'the peasantry have no patience with theories. . . . Set the landlord's house on fire or loot the Octroi post as an example and you will have impressed them with the will to do something, and given them heart. Don't let us be cowards.'

'I am a Rajput and not afraid of killing,' said Kanwar Rampal Singh persuasively, 'but, seriously, to preach the doctrine of the sword is to succumb to the lowness and vulgarity of the English die-hards. To exalt terrorism with a view to making an impression on the peasants is to do what General Dyer did. For he, too, has said that his object in shooting the unarmed crowd in Jallianwallah Bagh was to create "a wide impression," "a great moral effect." And, without subscribing to Verma Sahib's "considerations of sentiment" or Gandhiji's "non-violence," both of which, in the last resort, become merely violence against oneself, I can say that I disbelieve Dyer's maxim that "Force is the only thing an Asiatic has any respect for." And I know that many Europeans don't believe in it either. . . . I only laughed at Sukhua's exploit because it was so ridiculous. And it would be so cruel to those who have just begun to hold their heads high to be condemned when it was my brother who assaulted them. . . . I am not unaware, of course, that the peasants seem to have taken your teaching to heart. But if we want to organize the Kisan Sabha. . . .'

'You are afraid, Kanwar Sahib!' Razwi challenged the Count. 'You have got this idea of the Kisan Sabha so firmly rooted in your head that you will not open your mind to look at anything else. Well, of course, there are many laws in our country, but none so far which prevents you from calling yourself and your best friend, the All-India Kisan Sabha! . . .'

The whole company burst out laughing at this description of their efforts.

'But, really,' Razwi raced on. 'It is a desperate little attempt to overthrow the Government. It is only another form of the ineffectual academism of Professor Radhakamal Mukerjee, who knows that the peasantry can't survive on thin gruel and a loincloth, but thinks that a few more laws, a little strengthening of the State, and all will be well. And our Congress leaders—wah, what to say! They are so glad to see these peasants, who have crawled about like worms on the countryside, prey to disease, famine, flood and a continuous bellyache, no longer blaming God for their misfortunes but

understanding how scarcity is caused by the dirty intrigues of British big business, that they go thumping the tubs of their stomachs as if they were pregnant with a new conception of liberty! And when you ask them what they are going to do when they get control of the state, they look blankly at you for a moment, smile, fawn, pat your head—oh with such paternal tenderness, and say: "Son, everything will be all right when we get into power. . . . And now you want a donation for some society of yours. Here, I will give you a letter for Srijut So-and-so, a true son of the country, who has a wife who brought a lakh of rupees as dowry, and who is almost a socialist." And then they dismiss you, and go about vaguely, with the fig leaf of non-violence covering their naked lust for power, mendicants dedicated to the new religion of capturing power of which Gandhi is the chief apostle! And we wander the roads and form our own conclusions: When the Badeshi state goes, there will be a Swadeshi state—a mere change of names and labels! For, I don't believe they will ever sack the I.C.S. personnel, reduce their pay or cut their pensions. And, what's more, I believe they will use the same police which now beats them with staves, and the same regulations by which they are put in gaols, to suppress those whom they don't like! . . . I tell you man is evil, man is rotten, man is greedy and selfish. . . .'

'And he ought to be exterminated from the surface of the earth,' added Professor Verma, glowing with anger as he turned to Razwi. 'That's what you say!—Where has all the idealism of youth gone?'

'But the wonder to me is that you come to work for the peasants,' said the Count, facing Razwi.

'It is the itch, the itch!' Razwi said, flushed and proud. 'The attempt to break away from circumstances, to forget, to forget. . . .'

Lalu felt impatient at the downrightness of this adolescent, but then he recalled how he himself must have annoyed his elders when he had gone about breaking taboos and talking wild talk, and he relented and felt tenderly towards this lonely bird who had been wounded in the wing long before he

had learnt to fly. The boy's indictment had left the Count and Professor Verma smitten, and they both looked embarrassed as Razwi's attack threw them together: revolutionaries faced by some one who was even more revolutionary than themselves!

For a moment, one of those moments during which each of them thought of the things the other *might* say but didn't, the three intellectuals remained silent.

'I say, Razwi, friend, you did not go on to declaim against Revolution,' the Count began as if he was unable to bear the silence. 'You might have paid us the compliment of a good debunking. For, though we are far away yet from the position where our Revolution could become Reaction and Tyranny, I suppose we are likely to do so in your *opinion one day* . . . . But permit me to debunk you a little! Your attempt to break away from circumstances springs from the same motive as Gandhiji's! Your *twin renunciations* are mere attempts at self-flagellation: You have nothing to renounce, you have nothing! The most Gandhiji could have hoped for, as a member of a conquered race, was by ingratiating himself with the Conquerers, to achieve a certain measure of distinction or high office under their control. And as a young man of respectable family, who had been admitted to the Bar, he might have secured himself a knighthood like most of our Liberal Leaders. But the humiliation of being turned out of a first-class compartment in South Africa, because he was a "native," sowed the seed of revolt in him. As for moral perfection through asceticism, vegetarianism, self-abasement, sexual abstinence, and fasting, it seems to me that a man who pursues each natural impulse in his body with the relentless fury of the Mahatma may be far more governed by hate and fear than *those who indulge* their desires! But, I tell you, all these processes of non-violent non-co-operation, as well as your terrorism, are attempts at *dissociation from existing authority.* "I *shall* fast unto death" is the same kind of signal to the masses as the throwing of a bomb— "Listen, men," it says, "your rulers are your enemies! Deny their power over you! Negate their oppression! Dissociate yourself from them! . . ."'

'And to deny is not enough,' added Professor Verma; 'denial must be followed by replacement.'

'Perhaps non-violence is a valid tactic,' said the Count, 'in the struggle against landlordism and capitalism, and perhaps violence of an organized kind is inevitable to strike at the dominating interests—but anarchism, torn between envy and hatred, leads merely to self-torture. . .'

'Scratch a student below the skin and you find an anarchist! —with no discipline but a million wild theories and desires,' said Lal Singh, unable to resist the temptation to preach to the young Razwi.

'You are all cowards!' retaliated Razwi. 'You dare not face the truth, the awful truth, that you are afraid of your own desires!'

'Perhaps it can be put in another way,' said Prefessor Verma gravely, trying to placate Razwi as well as to calm himself. 'The tragedy of our time is symbolic of the tragedy of human life in general. In history, men have always been pursuing utopias. We do not see that the most perfect mechanism for social justice and the most equalitarian social structure will not eliminate the possibility of such conflicts as arise from envy, jealousy and love of power. We do not see that human relations offer occasions for injustice on many different levels. . . . To murder our way to an imagined utopia, however, is unthinking and ignorant. What we want is love and understanding. We do not see that the worst human conflicts arise from the self-righteousness of men who are too self-righteous to know how evil they are!'

'All is well, then, in the best of all worlds,' jeered the Count, going off at a tangent from Professor Verma again. 'And we must pursue the doctrine of the golden mean! . . . Look out, Verma Sahib, they will be offering you a Baronetcy. Or they might grant you the honorary title of His Holiness. Certainly you have resolved it all to that perennial source of anarchy, the human heart. . . . Anyhow, now I know that you will understand the creatureliness of old Sukhua in beating up Kanwar Birpal Singh and forgive my finiteness in standing by without lifting a finger.'

Professor Verma's face was pale as he stood away listening to this bitter sarcasm. He was trying hard to control his thin lips, but his whole visage seemed contorted into a pathetic little knot.

Lalu felt sorry for him because he knew that eating the Count's food, dependent even for his pocket-money on Kanwar Rampal Singh, a highly learned man, Verma was at a disadvantage. He himself had learnt a great deal from the Professor ever since he left Nandpur, and though he had become committed to a great deal more than the learned man it was only perhaps because he did not now so much. He was inclined to think kindly of him when he had previously regarded him as a figure of fun. For Verma Sahib had not been designed by nature for the rough and tumble of the platform, but to be a teacher of youth at some University, where he could have been cloistered in comfortable apartments, with all the wisdom of the ages about him, which he could have interpreted for the new India from the independent point of view which his free spirit had adopted towards everything. But in a world where recommendations alone or a good pedigree could secure a job, there was no room in the Universities run under the Angrezi Sarkar for a man whose father happen to be a humble clerk. He had managed to win scholarships; and, in Germany, he had supported himself by writing articles for newspapers and by teaching Sanskrit, till the foreign office gave him a job during the war. Then, though he had kept his integrity, he had been pushed by his intellect to recognize the deeper implications of the evil in India, and he had come forward into the struggle, though his whole training as a detached scholar had made him constitutionally incapable of taking sides actively, though he was full of disgust for the wire-pulling of politicians and parties, and though his wide culture had made him incapable of accepting anything spurious. His natural caution, or fear, against being jockeyed into an attitude had, however, somewhat blunted the edge of his imagination. And, since he lacked imagination, or the capacity to foresee new ways of life, to predict the unfolding of events, which requires a sort of courage, he found it easier to recline back to the old life than

to venture out into uncharted territories, beyond which stood the frightening spectacle of new vistas, new lands and new colours. He had recoiled back in horror against the violence he saw growing around himself, and Lalu could appreciate the humanity from which the horror sprang, though he believed it to be far in excess of the actual incident which had given rise to it.

Later that morning, Professor Verma expressed his intention of leaving Rajgarh, saying that he had realized how he could never finish his encyclopædic work on India without access to a good library. Lal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi all tried to persuade him to postpone his departure till the arrival of some students and other comrades who had promised to come to Rajgarh for a week-end school. But with that extraordinary finality which almost made him wooden and unbending in his dignified calm, he refused to listen to any more talk on this subject. Kanwar Rampal Singh, who knew the stubborn pride in his friend's character, as well as the way to handle it so as not to lose the ultimate friendliness which they had for each other in spite of their differences, counselled his followers not to press the Professor any further and himself refrained, after one or two humorous suggestions, to deter him from his decision. Nor was any fuss made at the time of Verma Sahib's actual departure in the afternoon. But precisely for this reason, when his simple luggage, the leather suitcase and the hold-all, were put on the yekka, and the Professor stood hugging the leather portfolio containing the notes for his *magnum opus*, and the servants stared at him with a cold curiosity, as if he was one of those guests who was going away after having outstayed his welcome at their Master's house, clouds of tears seemed to dim his eyeglasses and he kept nervously losing the balance of his feet, as though the laws of gravity were playing havoc with him. And then his first efforts at cold handshakes with his comrades broke down, his portfolio dropped, and he found himself yielding to their embraces, though he soon assembled the leather case, assumed the restrained composure of his usual manner and walked away, awkward and unattended.

A pall of sadness seemed to spread on the mind of the comrades after Professor Verma's departure, almost as if Verma Sahib had died and had left a gap in their midst. The bitter controversy which had raged in the morning, and on account of which he had left, ended in a strange silence which seemed to be the harbinger of more trouble to come.

The trouble was not long in coming.

About dusk the tall Rajput Sub-Inspector of Police, Brij Bhushan Singh, who had come to arrest Lal Singh after the meeting on the eclipse festival, arrived at Rajgarh palace.

This time he did not wait for the servants to announce him, but barged right into the Count's room and, without any of the civilities he had shown months ago, presented a paper to Kanwar Rampal Singh.

Lal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi waited in the hush. They vaguely guessed that it was something to do with the brawl this morning, because Kanwar Birpal Singh, the manager of the estate, was known to have gone to Allahabad to report to the Commissioner about the assault on his person. But they did not know whether the Commissioner had ordered the arrest of blind Sukhua or what.

'The scroll of our destiny,' the Count whispered after he had scanned the paper, 'from that invisible fate, the Sarkar.'

He perused the paper again, winced, smiled a weak smile and, without any more fooling, said: 'An order that we should get out of Rajgarh and remain interned in Kisan Nagar where the police can keep a watch on us.'

Then he turned to the Sub-Inspector and said:

'Acha, Thanedar Sahib.'

Brij Bhushan Singh seemed to be relieved that the prince had not tried to embarrass him by pulling his leg, as he had done when the Inspector called some months ago. But, nevertheless, he wanted to have an assurance that Kanwar Rampal Singh would obey the order.

'What are your intentions, Maharaj?' he stammered, joining his hands. The old humility of the subject of Rajgarh, who had got to his present position through the recommendations

of the deceased brother of Kanwar Rampal Singh, had returned to him.

'Intentions and motives, like thieves, are difficult to track down,' the Count replied evasively, tempted to tease Brij Bhushan Singh in spite of himself. 'But in the face of the police *our thoughts have no chance of hiding anywhere.*'

'Oh, Maharaj, forgive me,' the Thanedar said, suddenly falling on his knees and bending his head low over his joined hands. 'Forgive your humble servant. . . . It is not my fault, Huzoor. Orders are orders, and I have to obey. I could never have dared to come into this room and asked you to go out of your palace, if your own brother had not gone and got this order. . . . What can I do, huzoor, I am only a servant of the Sarkar!'

'No matter,' said the Count, without relaxing the muscles of his face. 'I understand, Brij Bhushan, you are only doing your duty.'

But in the silence that ensued, Brig Bhushan Singh threw himself at Kanwar Rampal Singh's feet and wailed:

'Oh, Maharaj, forgive me, forgive me for my sins. I am guilty of terrible, terrible disloyalties, towards your honour. . . . I do not know what quarrel between your younger brother and yourself has brought this on you, or why the Manager Sahib has taken a dislike to you and your friends. But he has made me do such things that I cannot even regard myself as a man, but as a rape-mother, brother-in-law weakling! . . . Oh, Maharaj, how can I bring myself ever to tell you of my infamies! . . . But listen, Maharaj, and forgive me if you can. . . . When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru came here, Captain Effendi gave me orders to get some constables to break up meetings, or, if they could not do that, to puncture the car in which you Sahibs were touring the countryside. . . .'

'So I had to go to Partabgarh from Nanakpur to get the tyre repaired because of your machinations, salé, dog!' Ram Din burst out indignantly.

'And Panditji couldn't stay for the meeting through your good services!' said Lal Singh, the conflicting feeling of pity for Brij Bhushan and anger against him, playing in his eyes.

'May I die, may the dust of your shoes be sprinkled on my head, I was at fault. . . . Several times I tried to master the courage to come and tell you, Maharaj; several times I asked my wife whether it was not best for me to give up the service of this Sarkar. But for the sake of the belly one does everything, Huzoor. . . .'

'One does not eat dung, you dog, pig!' said Ram Din, and got up and kicked him in disgust.

The Count restrained Ram Din with a gesture, while Lalu contemplated the man with pounding heart.

'Oh, you can beat me, Maharaj, or you can cast me into a well, but breaking meetings and puncturing your car broke my heart. Each stave blow on your men, was a blow on my inside and each nail in the tyre hurt me. . . . Especially after the peasants were released in court and I was afraid that some of the constables might be called to give evidence and tell upon me. . . . I wanted to come and kiss your feet, Maharaj, and tell you all about it. . . . But I had not the courage. . . . Oh, I have wanted, every day, to come and talk to you heart to heart, Huzoor. But I was too far gone in crime, especially as a month ago I received fresh orders to do something more wanton than anything I had done before. . . . O God, how shall I tell of you this? You will never forgive me. . . .'

'Unburden yourself without fear,' said the Count. 'I am your victim and not you my prisoner.'

'O, Maharaj, you can spit on me, you can abuse me, you can beat me, you can do what you like, but do forgive me,' began Brij Bhushan Singh, working himself into an importunity which almost made the spectators laugh with embarrassment. 'At least I never had occasion to carry out this last special order, Maharaj. In that I was blessed. Because, how I could have raised my own hands against your noble person, I can't think. . . . But the orders were that I was to have you waylaid in the dark, or when you were alone, and to have you beaten up. . . . Oh, Maharaj, I can't bear it, I shall resign from this bitichod service. I cannot go on in it any more. But, Maharaj, please forgive me. . . . Oh, please forgive me!'

And he lay sobbing in a desperate huddle, as if he were

pinned under the weight of a misery which he could not bear, forgetful that he had begun to whine only to be able to ask whether Kanwar Rampal Singh was going to abey the order or not. Submerged in the thick mire of those memories which he had unearthed and stirred up, he seemed to become a hideous loathsome creature, as if his flesh were tainted by his ignoble practices. And Lalu felt himself shrinking from him as if he was a leper, though he tried to argue that the man had only been doing his duty.

'Go now,' the Count whispered with the glint of a wild anger in his eyes after he had contemplated the man's confession through a prolonged silence. 'I don't take my orders from the police or agents provocateurs. . . . I shall go and see the Deputy Commissioner at once.'

It seemed strange to Lal Singh that the Count had changed and stiffened so soon from his benign kindliness to a sharp, nonchalance, almost savage and unforgiving in its proud arrogance.

'Maharaj, Mehta Sahib is being transferred,' reported Brij Bhushan Singh. 'And there will be trouble if you don't go to Kisan Nagar. I will be dismissed if I allow you to proceed.'

'I shall see the Deputy Commissioner's father, the Commissioner, or his grandfather, the Governor—what's more, I have got a few things to settle with the Government of India!' There was a resurgence of pride in the Count, which the knowledge that the police could ever have intended to lay hands on him had called forth. But then he saw the abject expression on Brij Bhushan's face and relented: 'We shall carry out your orders; we will go to Kisan Nagar. Now, are you satisfied? if so, go!'

'Oh, Maharaj, it is not my fault,' the Sub-Inspector said as he got up with joined hands. 'Tell me you will forgive me. . . .'

'Aré go!' Ram Din said, rising to enforce the Count's orders.

Lalu proceeded towards the river-house that evening with a thudding head and a throbbing heart. He wondered how Maya would react to the change from the rooms in the big

house overlooking the river to communal living with the ryots in the barn at Kisan Nagar.

A thick stinging smoke spread over the village of Rajgarh from the cow-dung cakes in the hearth fires of the peasants, and Lalu felt impatient to be working for the day when all the straw huts would be demolished and give place to clean, new houses with proper chimneys for the ejection of smoke. But ahead of him was Maya, the projected image of a past dream, completely unrelated to, and ignorant of, the increasingly complex and bitter realities he felt he would have to face in the present struggle. How was he to make her understand that terrible things were happening, that, even before the Sarkar or the landlords had started an offensive against them, their meagre little group of workers had split up among themselves, that Professor Verma had left them for ever, that he was not sure, after the discussion of the morning, what the Count was really up to, and whither they were going and what would happen to them. . . . All this would only increase her apathy, confirm her in the assurance with which she had turned a deaf ear to his brief references to his work, leave her more than ever involved in her own preoccupations with laces and scented soaps and attars, like a charming flower wrapped in the contemplation of its own scents and exhalations. . .

After her revelation of Kanwar Birpal Singh's attempt to seduce her, he had, in a resurgence of fear and weakness, almost succumbed to the wild desire of taking her away from the scene of peasant struggles to some safe haven where he could earn a comfortable living. She was pregnant, and he thought he should keep her safe from all taint of the realities which had brought such barriers between them, to create a world for her where she could remain the innocent, lazy, self-willed child she was, obstinately prejudiced against any effort which might rudely awaken her out of her dream of floating down the river of life. . . . But how could he go back on all his experience, how could he forget, how could he renounce his responsibilities and yield to the fantasy of a weak woman's universe!

And yet, because he remembered the first thrill of that immediate contact between their bodies on which he had built

his relationship with her, because he knew that in all the deadness of her nature there was a spark of life, he had felt attached to her and had been torn at the impossibility of making her understand.

So he had gone on living a dual life, occupied by an earnest struggle, as well as building up a deliberate string of pretty lies, with a great many variations of the 'childling' kind of endearment which corresponded so well with the affectionate whimsicality and gaily-dressed fairy world quality which she brought to living.

Lately, however, she had been more and more alive to the vague stirrings in her womb for she was almost seven months gone, and she was at the highest peak of her absorption in herself, sparkling with a bright elfishness which gave promise of her growth and flowering. But, since a new kicking life was in her own belly, it seemed to Lalu to be only another manifestation of her selfishness, of the extension of her will to flourish and to assume the dignified status of a mother which was considered so propitious in India, even though a mother mentally remained a child and the new-born babe seldom inherited the gifts of light and strength which a full-grown mother could give it.

Thus, with everything in the melting-pot, Lalu was being driven by contrary urges, being burnt up in the fire of conflicting loyalties, even as the inexorable compulsion of his work bore him along. Only, at each step he had had to reckon with Maya.

As he passed under the tamarind tree and looked towards the sands on the banks of the Ganges, the darkness seemed to go to his throat like a thief in the night, so uncanny was the intense gloom of this ancient riverside, replete with its memories and legends of God, and spirits and dead heroes, strewn with the charred bones of all the peasants who had been dying for years in these parts and who were burnt there, and who, Lalu always thought, had turned malignant ghosts because of their unappeased hungers and thirsts. There was a flicker of light in the witchwoman Bhogat Mai's room, which frightened him the more, and the smell of incense from the nearby temple

gripped his senses and made him sweat. He tried to control himself against these superstitious fears, but the night seemed almost sentient as its indigo blackness mixed with the constant swish of the river and the recurrent notes of insects and other earth creatures.

He racked up the stairs, almost panting with fear of the elements. Maya was knitting some baby clothes in the light of a bright table lamp, like the stuffed doll of a demure goddess in a temple, her head covered by a Kashmir shawl with a colourful border done at Amritsar, her face suffused with the flush of that tenseness which was her response to his fear of her resentment.

'Is the meal ready?' he asked.

'Always waiting for you, ready, cooked and prepared!' she said brightly, though she did not look up from the beaming vacancy of her goddess's stance.

Lalu was surprised at her answer, for usually she was sullen at the first impact, as if reminding him of how he had cheated her out of the happiness which was her birthright.

'What is the matter?' she said softly, though her voice was not the sighing whisper of the casual, unattached person, but slyly judicious as if she were an old grandmother remotely interested in the improperties of the young.

'Everything is the matter and nothing is the matter,' he said, not knowing how to break it to her and giving himself time to think of ways and means.

'You are a liar,' she said, calling a smile from somewhere in the emptiness of her apparent poise. 'Kanwar Birpal Singh has asked the Court of Wards to turn his brother out, because the peasants gave him a good thrashing this morning. He is afraid of the Revolutionists, isn't he?'

'I expect so,' he said.

There was a naïveté in the manner in which she seemed to be taking up the cudgels on behalf of the revolutionists which embarrassed Lalu more than if she had stuck to the casual disinterestedness of her former self. Perhaps some palace servant had told her all about the morning's row. But he did not expect her to become a revolutionary in the flickering of

an eyelid and knew that she was using her woman's fascination for, and recoil against, Kanwar Birpal Singh, to smooth some of the barriers that had arisen between them on account of the prince's attention to her. It seemed to him that it was not he who had been lying but Maya, who was capriciously selecting one lover for special sympathy when she had abjured the other.

'Never mind, the sun will shine,' she said airily. 'One day, these hypocrites will cease to exist and the peasants will be free.'

Was she laughing at him or trying to cheer him up because she thought he was depressed. Did she know that in reality he was afraid of her, afraid of telling her the news, because he could not bear her long-drawn sulks? And how had she suddenly become infected with the gospel of Revolution. He contemplated her for a moment. Her big eyes were lit with an extraordinary light, and her ivory, oval face looked now like the toy goddess suddenly come to life, so elated she seemed from the background of her months of sullenness.

'What has inspired you with such hatred against the tyrants?' he asked with a smile.

'Don't you hate the landlords and the Sarkar?' she said. 'I am your wife and I agree with you. Hasn't Sri Guru Nanak said . . .'

'So you only agree with me because Sri Guru Nanak has said that a wife ought to agree with her husband?' he said, almost furious at what he considered was the slavishness of the lord-and-master worshipping Indian woman in her.

But she remained disconcertingly serene and poised, in spite of the rebuke. And he could not help being bewitched by the charm of her innocence even as he was irritated by her effort to please him. The truth was that he had been adjusting himself to her bourgeois solidity, slowly adapting and controlling his natural responses to her, and now, suddenly, he had to arrest that process in his nature. He was more embarrassed than if she had remained true to her own character.

'What is the matter?' she said, looking up from the knitting so that the goddess-doll stance gave place to the easy grace of a kitten which wanted a pat on the head. 'Tell me what has happened?'

She seemed not only to be courting his affection but his love of mankind, and he felt the Revolution becoming cheap in his eyes if such as Maya were to become addicted to it: certainly, she would never be able to regard the struggle as any more than the social service which the wives of the gentry rendered to the poor by way of charity and self-advertisement, through the sales of discarded clothes at the frequent bazaars which were nowadays held in northern India. At the best, it would be sympathy for people of a lower class, near enough to the genuine approach, but never would this spoilt child, brought up to notice the fine-drawn, delicate contours of her face in a mirror, devote herself to the peasants with the same intense, selfless devotion which he, who had suffered the humiliations of being a peasant, brought to them. The torments he was going through to be worthy of that devotion, to be true to himself and not to betray the men, were hard enough because of the unconscious accretion of all the stupid notions of superiority in him,—how then could this rare flower bloom in the stubble field!

'Come, tell me,' she insisted, purring by him felinely to deposite her work-basket in a corner of the room.

'Childling, what is there to eat?' he said, relenting from his priggishness and feeling easier about breaking the news to her now that she was in a loving mood. Though, would she be able to face eviction, he wondered.

'I have packed up everything,' she said, 'so it is only a simple meal to-night.'

'You have packed up?' he exclaimed.

'Yes, when are we leaving, to-night or to-morrow morning?'

'To-morrow—but who told you?' he said, panting for breath.

'Never mind who told me!' Maya replied.

'We will have to live in the Kisan Nagar barn, with the peasants, you know?' he warned her. 'And you are with child!'

'I am ready,' she said, and, with her woman's practicalness, she began to tell him: 'I have put your clothes in your kit-bag. . . .'

He could not help chuckling with laughter. Then, lest he should hurt her if her conversion was genuine, he looked away, relieved yet frightened of the consequences of this new attitude of hers. For it would impose a new burden on him, to teach her, to bring her forward to the Revolution.

The news of the orders served on Kanwar Rampal Singh and his friends from Rajgarh spread and brought sympathetic peasants flocking to Kisan Nagar.

As the Count, accompanied by Ram Din and Razwi, had left to see high officials about the Court of Wards order, Lal Singh was the chief recipient of this tender solicitude.

Of course, Raghu, Madhu, and blind Sukhua had welcomed him and his spouse to their fold with open arms. But since Sukhua, knowing that he was the cause of this upset, was feeling rather sheepish, Raghu, the devotee of God, held forth even as he exhorted the throng of peasants not to obstruct the wan afternoon sunlight which fell on Lalu who sat on a stool in the middle.

'God's will works even through the evil deeds of men,' he said, 'And this is like the exile of Sri Ram Chander from his kingdom again.'

'Who is Sri Ram Chander?' objected the literal Madhu. 'If it be Kanwar Rampal Singh Sahib, then where is his spouse Sita, even though Comrade Lal Singh here may be the Lakshman? And if Comrade Lal Singh be Sri Ram Chander and Comrade Maya Vati be the Sita, then where is Lakshman? For Kanwar Sahib is older than Comrade Lal Singh and cannot be Lakshman! Anyhow, where is King Dasharatha and his wife Keikei?'

'Oh, leave this talk!' said Mithu of Nanakpur, the hero of the trial. 'You bring in the name of God every time a mishap befalls us.'

'But two eggs and one of them spoiled,' said Sukhua. 'To think that that manager should turn his elder brother out of the palace!'

'That is not the talk,' said Mithu. 'What right has any landlord to stay in a palace, be it Kanwar Birpal Singh or Kanwar

Rampal Singh. Our Kanwar Rampal Singh himself does not care to stay in the palace. And he would say what I say: "Why should the landlords lord it so?"'

'We certainly don't seem to be content with a state of affairs in which if the landlord hands the land to his son at death, only the name of the landlord changes and everything else remains the same!' said Lalu ironically, affecting Mithu's vehemence.

'To be sure, it is not just that a younger brother should be able to turn out an elder brother!' said Sukhua.

'There is no question of justice or injustice, brother,' interrupted Mithu. 'But there will soon be a change. It is about time that a direct blow of the lathi was struck against our enemies, so that innocent men can plough their lands and provide for their women and children. . . . Isn't that so, Comrade Lal Singh?'

'Saying is one thing, doing another,' answered Lalu with a smile, cautious and unsure of his ground in this new emergency, particularly on the first day after his eviction from Rajgarh.

Some more peasants came up and craned their necks across the shoulders of the crowd to look at him, the victim of the new oppression.

'Come and sit down, brothers,' he said, wishing he could contain himself in his isolation, away from the crowd, narrow the circle about his own self, and think, because he did not want to be the centre-piece of this tamasha, did not even want their sympathy.

They had themselves come from rotten, roofless houses, after their hopes of better prices and more gentleness from the landlords had been finally dashed to the ground. And he was no hero leaving the comfort of a good house. He wanted to do something for them. And yet the leadership being dispersed he did not know exactly what to do, beyond preparing for more rallies in the villages. If only he could think of some sensational plan. But a curious apathy seemed to possess him. Perhaps he had not been able to adapt himself to the change of scene and was still afraid of Maya, who was helping Sobha to make tea in the open-air kitchen under the banyan tree. He vaguely felt the need for uniting the men around him for

some kind of action, because if their individual voices and deeds were allowed to become too shrill then there would only be a few more hand-to-hand tussles between the oppressors and the oppressed in the villages, a violent scuffle, bloodshed or murder and everything would end in smoke.

'When we have killed the landlords, brother Lal Singh,' asked Mithu, 'shall we all become landlords in our own right?'

For a moment the peasants waited tensely to listen to Comrade Lal Singh's answer from where they sat, squatting and ogling at him with unblinking eyes which were almost popping out of their small shy round heads. But this was only too accurate a confirmation of Lal Singh's prognostications, and he looked at the man without answering. Then he realized that it was nothing to be solemn about; for, after all, it was through this campaign that the peasants seemed to be throwing off their abjectness and fear and speaking their minds freely. And he laughed a belated laugh in lieu of an answer to the question. The peasants laughed after him, shuffled about a little and coughed.

'To be sure, these landlords are no men,' said Sukhua. 'Utter a word or show a fisticuff and they crumble to pieces!'

'Take the name of God, salé, blind Sur Das, and keep quiet after your misdeeds at the palace, which have caused such inconvenience to our Kanwar Sahib and comrades!' Raghu rebuked Sukhua.

'To be sure, something is going to happen soon, Maharaj, isn't it?' Sukhua protested to Lal Singh, looking up from the empty sockets of his lashless eyes.

'To be sure, you leader Sahibs have been calling for "Revolution,"' said Madhu commonsensically. 'Now, I do not understand what Revolution will bring, — but I do know that it will bring the day of reckoning with our enemies. And, anyhow, we are prepared to follow such good sons of the earth as Comrade Rampal Singh and you, anywhere. We are determined to do something.'

'To be sure,' insisted Sukhua. 'Let us teach them their own tune on their own drum.'

'Go, don't talk so much,' Raghu shouted at Sukhua. 'Go

and see if your wife has helped Comrade Lal Singh's spouse to get the tea ready!'

'Has Sobha accepted him for a husband, then, after all?' Lalu laughed, though he was surprised.

'That is why the dog is feeling like a lion,' Madhu said. 'That is why he hit the Manager Sahib yesterday. The uprush of hot blood in him. . . . And he had taken us to the palace to ask for a gift to celebrate his wedding! . . . Now, he has spoiled it all.'

'They are only jealous,' said Sukhua as he got up to go. 'Give me your eyes, they say, and you grope about, the selfish swine!'

'To be sure, Sukhua is right, brothers,' said Mithu, 'Comrade Lal Singh has spoken of the war in which he fought with other Hindustani sepoys and goras, where crores of men were killed and which brought famine to Hindustan. . . . To be sure, Comrade Lal Singh is right: the poor soldiers get killed for the glory of their Sarkars. To be sure, the people of one country have no quarrel with those of another.'

'But the Angrezi Goras are superior folk,' said Madhu. 'They seem to shoot down the Hindustanis without much compunction.'

'Even so, to be sure,' continued Mithu, 'as Comrade Lal Singh says, there are two races and two religions in the world, the rich and the poor. That is so all over the world, for all the folk who have gone to Vilayat tell the same tale: there are gora coolies and sweepers and there are rich Sahibs. To be sure, there is not a place where it is otherwise, except Roos, where the peasants and the labourers killed the Badshah and the rich folk in a fit of temper, and where the poor people are ruling the country now. . . .'

'Where is Roos?' one of the peasants in the circle asked in a shy feeble voice.

The other peasants leant forward at this brave effort of one of them and listened with all their faces.

'Have you left your turban at home because you think we are moneylenders who might snatch it in lieu of interest on debt?' Mithu said, almost as if his information had been challenged.

'It is to the north-west of Hindustan, brother,' Lalu said, though he was embarrassed at Mithu's exposition of the gospel.

'Vilayat is across the waters and Roos is beyond the frontier,' Mithu said, though he too had a very hazy notion of where Russia was. 'Calcutta and Bombay and Agra and Partabgarh are in Hindustan, but Roos is to the north of Punjab, isn't it so, Comrade Lal Singh?'

'In Roos they must speak another tongue,' said a peasant whose moustache was yellow with biri smoke. 'Otherwise the Roosis would have travelled to Hindustan and told us what goes on in their country and brought their merchandise to sell us, as the Chinis, the Tibetans and the men from Ladakh.'

'But how can poor people rule themselves,' said a third peasant. 'Because money is needed to rule, and only the rich folk, the Rajah, Maharajas and the Sahibs have money.'

'None of you folk have any notion of what happened in Roos,' said Mithu superiorly. 'But if Comrade Lal Singh says that they have made a Revolution there, then we too shall roll up our sleeves and tie our loin cloths to our waists and kill the moneylenders and the landlords at the given word! . . . To be sure, the leaders have only to give the word.'

'To be sure, the leaders have only to give the word,' Lalu said with a guffaw, 'and in one crowded hour of glorious life, everyone's head will be chopped off! . . . To be sure, we will do so because we know how to use a scythe to cut a goat's head at one blow, and how to kill a rabbit with a stone!'

Then, lest the simple among the company take his mockery seriously, he went on: 'And down into the well oblivion, will go all of us! Brothers, we are weak, and it is easier for us to talk big than to appreciate the hazards. . . .'

'Come, brothers, here is tea to keep you warm till the day of reckoning,' called Sukhua from the kitchen as he dipped a brass jug into a steaming bucket to help himself first.

'Comrade Lal Singh, I would like to talk to you for a few minutes,' said a dark young man with long curly hair, catching hold of him by the sleeve.

Lalu looked at the man: apparently he had been among the

crowd of peasants who had come to sympathize with him, though he couldn't, in spite of the rough homespun tunic and trousers he wore, be a peasant, because he had spoken in English.

'Who are you?' Lalu asked, on the defensive against possible agents provocateurs since Sub-Inspector Brij Bhushan Singh's confession.

'I am a comrade, hiding from the police,' said the young man with a broad grin, 'Sarshar, my name is. . . .'

'Oh, of course. When did you come, Comrade Sarshar?' Lalu turned to him now with excessive courtesy as he recognized him from the memory of the two previous occasions on which he had seen Sarshar engaged in private talks with Kanwar Rampal Singh.

Since his earlier visions of him Comrade Sarshar had changed into a strange rough figure, unshaved, unwashed and barefooted in the cold weather. And he seemed absolutely unceremonious, altogether without the airs and graces of the learned man he had seemed previously, as, dismissing Lalu's question with a wave of the hand, he began:

'I have a bone to pick with you, Comrade Lal Singh. Why are you so wrapt up in an aura of all-pervading sadness? What has happened to you? Why do you jeer at those peasants so for their revolutionary ardour? Why this pessimism? We all know about the hazards! I have myself been flogged by the police and I have been to jail in the past, but one can't go on making a long moan about it! . . . Look at those peasants around you? That man who was echoing but your own words did not give me an impression of sadness. He gave me a sense of new power, of the determination to go forward! There is no cause for sadness!'

The suddenness of this onslaught fairly took Lalu's breath away. Specially, because there was so much truth in the denunciation! For he (Lalu) had, through the torn elements in his nature, become addicted to such long-drawn self-questionings, that he had tended to wear a harassed, tormented look. The departure of Professor Verma, the absence of the Count, and his own sense of inferiority, his difficulties with Maya and

his general bafflement at not knowing what to do, had left him rudderless. He wished Comrade Sarshar had not come down just that day, for, on any other occasion, he would have found Lalu a more cheerful spectacle.

'I am sorry,' he said sheepishly. 'But Kanwar Rampal Singh has gone to see the authorities about the internment order.'

'That should give you no cause for sorrow, either, brother,' Sarshar interrupted almost rudely. 'That can only give us cause for disgust at the monstrous exhibition of weak-kneed chauvinism by people like Kanwar Rampal Singh. He wants to lead the peasant movement and yet he runs away from his work among the kisans to the waiting-rooms of the Deputy Commissioner, begging, imploring, rubbing his nose to be allowed to stay in his ancestral palace! What a spectacle—if the peasant leader is thrown out of the Sahib's verandah by a chaprasi!'

The shock of this further vehemence put Lalu's back up. Professor Verma's insinuation about Kanwar Rampal Singh's love of leadership was personal enough, but Comrade Sarshar's attack was almost slanderous. And, though Lalu had often resented this or that thing about the Count, his sense of loyalty to the giver of bread made him revolt against the stranger's verdict.

'Come and drink some tea, Sarshar Sahib,' he said, restraining his anger through the instinctive hospitality of the peasant in him.

'I have to catch the train to Allahabad,' said Sarshar indifferently. 'I came to Kisan Nagar this morning and waited for Kanwar Rampal Singh because he had an appointment with me. He did not turn up. . . . Now I have an important meeting to attend in Allahabad, so will you walk up to the station with me?'

'He had to go away suddenly,' Lalu said, apologizing for the Count as he proceeded towards the station with Sarshar.

'I know all about the urgency of Kanwar Sahib's departure,' Sarshar exploded, so that his long hair seemed to shake like black wasps darting in different directions after someone had

disturbed their nest. 'He thinks that if he goes and licks the boots of the Sarkar they will reinstitute him in his wing of the palace and everything will be all right! . . . Wah, my revolutionary!'

'Then why didn't you come and tell him so last night before he left?' Lalu asked indignantly.

'An accident of chance,' Comrade Sarshar said. And he hopped across a thorny branch of kikar which lay in the dust and screwed his face into a knot of anguished impatience.

'But what else could he have done?' Lalu said, feeling stupider and stupider as he dug into the prison of his mind.

'Why, of course, it is clear that he should have stuck to his guns. He should have removed to Kisan Nagar and stood by the peasants! But all this is in tune with his past conduct. Playing at Revolution! Setting up a commune! Working in isolation! Exalting himself by deliberately exploiting his position as a feudal patriarch and leading the peasants into the blind-alley of spontaneous expression, fooling round and making speeches, fancying himself as some sort of a hero! Why, any fool could have seen that a situation had been reached in these estates when there was clear evidence on all sides of an awakening, and when there were tremendous opportunities for organizing the peasants on a *conscious* basis of struggle. Instead, the peasants are all out for vengeance and destruction rather than struggle! What a fool, when he knew that months ago the peasants were throwing over their age-long faith in the permanence of the system which oppressed them! For, what did the riots show in Nasirabad, on the eclipse festival and at Kisan Nagar? I have no patience with such great men who can't even deign to be in touch with other workers in the cities and imagine they can lead a "Revolution" all on their own! . . . Khon khon . . . khon. . . .'

Comrade Sarshar's words sputtered into a cough, as if his anger at Kanwar Rampal Singh's behaviour was choking him.

Lalu realized the mistake which Kanwar Rampal Singh had made in going away to seek the help of the officials. Truly, that was a kind of betrayal. For, if he were honest, he himself in his bones had felt that he was being left in the lurch.

But he recoiled against Comrade Sarshar's rabid virulence,

against the superior consciousness which seemed to possess this revolutionary, and made him seem more like a devil than a man, and because the clarity of Sarshar's utterance showed the vagueness of his own thoughts and even of all the talks between the Count, Razwi and Professor Verma, and the mockery of the 'commune.'

'I realize,' he confessed, 'that we never seriously thought things out.'

'So you went on vaguely,' Sarshar lashed out pitilessly as he came to a standstill, thrust his neck forward and stamped his bare feet for emphasis. 'So you went on in the dark, the one-eyed leading the blind, excited by the thrill of action! Terrorists! Wah, not to speak of your Leaders! . . .' And he began to walk on again.

'You can't call us terrrorists, Comrade Sarshar, however else you may rebuke us!' said Lalu, hurt at this jibe. 'I was present in Kanwar Sahib's room when he and Professor Verma told off Comrade Razwi for wanting to excite bloodshed and arson!'

'Your Comrade Razwi may be a terrorist!' said Sarshar. 'And if only the great leader had condescended to ask us we could have told him that. That boy has been disrupting the student organizations and shitting in the camp of the Sarkar while he comes to piss in the Congress camp. . . . And, as for you people being different from the terrorists, there is not much of a difference, even though at first sight you two appeared to disagree. For you both believe in spontaneity. You folk believe in the spontaneity of the day-to-day struggle, flashing out one day, while the terrorists put their faith in the sudden and passionate outbursts of individuals so that they can show off to the world like self-sacrificing martyrs! . . .'

Lalu kept quiet. He was not impressed by the argument, and thought it to be only another exaggeration of a too excited, loud and fanatical brain. At the same time he turned in upon himself, seeking to unearth all his prejudices and thoughts, to see if there was something in Comrade Sarshar's point of view.

'Brother, don't think,' Sarshar said, turning indulgently

towards Lalu for a moment, 'that I want to argue with you for the sake of argument. Forgive my anger, but I have had to run about playing hide and seek with the police ever since I came out of jail after the 1919 campaign, and I haven't much wind. . . . But, you see, we have to use words to explain ourselves. And words are a very inadequate medium, for they are slippery and have colour and light and shade and traditional meanings which prevent their being used in a scientific sense. Besides, our languages are yet immature, and we shall have a great many difficulties in conducting our struggle unless we take certain terms from foreign languages and redefine them before using them. Sometimes it is better to take words from writers who have been fighting a struggle similar to ours and apply them to our own movement. If these words seem loud and unpleasant and shock us, it is better to stop to inquire into our own prejudices and see if it is not our stupid pride rather than any inherent horror in a phrase which is the cause of all the trouble. . . . Now, I assure you that I am not juggling with words when I call you people terrorists. If you folk remain absorbed in the details of day-to-day work, hearing grievances about illegal exactions, about quarrels among the peasants, about forced labour and evictions, mortgages and debts, and then go making fervid assertions and obstinate denials among yourselves, concocting ingenious and fantastic hypotheses out of your own brains without reading a book, without conducting a study circle, without trying to understand and apply the lessons of previous experience to your struggle, without making any effort to unite the peasants by explaining to them the true nature of their position in relation to the factory workers who are the vanguard of our movement—if you become what Comrade Lenin has called the "pure and simple" labourites, believing in the spontaneous recognition by the peasants of their plight, then what will actually happen will be that the leadership will remain on one level of awareness, while the kisans will be on another level, and the heroism of individual great men will be increasingly substituted for the struggle of the people! That would lead to the kind of impression-making which Gandhiji resorts to when

he talks of offering individual non-violence! No different from the impression-making of Bengal terrorists! . . . You people may have the best intentions, but, then they say in English, the road to hell is paved with good intentions! And laziness of the kind, which goes on believing in primitivism and does not lay stress on intelligent organization and solidarity among the workers, betrays not only a lack of confidence in the revolutionary movement of the people, but almost a kind of unconscious contempt and hatred of the masses! . . . The wild dreams of the exalted leaders flourish, and people begin to dream of glory, build up private myths of a revolution, in this world, in the heavens and nowhere in particular!—This is the malady from which Kanwar Rampal Singh seems to be suffering!'

Lalu responded to the tone of this utterance with less hostility. He was already more amenable. There seemed to be a patent sincerity in Sarshar's long-winded utterance and the comrade seemed to know what he was talking about. The confusion in his mind seemed to clear a little, though he still could not see how the struggle would have to be conducted in the future. But he felt relieved, after the agitation of contrary emotions and the thoughts of the previous day, to see the whole business in another light. As he was still not certain about many things he wished Comrade Sarshar had come down earlier and told them what to do, because then the movement might have progressed along different lines. . . . It would have been a blessing for the comrade to stay for a few days and put him on the right lines. But Sarshar seemed to be hurrying along towards the railway station, as if he were devoured by some demon, urged by some inner passion from which nothing could detain him.

The sun was going down beyond the railway huts which were still some distance away, and the thin film of evening haze was growing thicker on the peaceful though wild outskirts of the dhak jungle which spread towards the banks of the Ganges on the far left. The peasants seemed already to be finishing the round of the day's work, as they were leaving the irrigation wells and going forth in troops to dig the channels

in the fields, with their hoes and mattocks and baskets, while a few of them sat, wrapped in torn blankets in little groups round fires of straw, smoking the hookah of peace before going home, coughing out the phlegm of the catarrh in their throats to the tune of devotional invocations: 'Ram re Ram! Hey Narain! Hey Sri Krishna!'

'What is to be done, then?' Lalu asked as he saw the accelerated urgency in Sarshar's pace.

'Brother,' said Sarshar, patting Lalu on the back, 'if you are convinced that I have not been looking under the bed for fancied anarchists or trying to fight you for belonging to a society given to religious intolerance, then please believe me that the first thing to do is to think out the significance of Revolution for the peasants. You can't just pick up a stave, shout a slogan and march forward to Revolution! Why, you will walk right into the arms of the police if you employ such methods! You can't open hostilities against the most organized and deeply entrenched Imperialism with the resources of Kanwar Rampal Singh's gang, having no contacts with circles in other districts, without any systematic and carefully considered plan for organizing, instructing and steeling the workers for a prolonged and stubborn struggle! Comrade Lenin called such primitivism in Russia a "disease"; in our country it is an epidemic.'

As before, he stopped and, exerting all his muscles to give his words emphasis, he began bitterly: 'We all know where the mobilization of the masses begins; the thing is to know how it is to proceed and where it is to end.'

Then Comrade Sarshar took out a packet of biris from the left pocket of his tunic, lowered his eyes under his pince-nez, as if to see the effect of his words on Lalu, offered him a fag, put one in his own mouth, mimed with his hands to ask for a match and, on Lalu signifying negation, darted towards a group of road-makers who sat round a hubble-bubble.

'Can I light my biri, brothers?' he asked the kisans.

'One live coal is good for a hundred fires, brother,' one of the peasants answered.

'To be sure, brothers,' Sarshar said, leaning his head to

adjust the fag to the glow in the chilm. Inhaling a mouthful of smoke, and swallowing it whole as if this was his breakfast, he turned and helped Lalu to light his biri. Then he said, 'To be sure, brothers, cotton wool must not linger too long by fire,' and, laughing, proceeded on his way.

'Saying fire doesn't burn one's mouth,' one of the road-minders called out.

'To be sure, to be sure,' Sarshar answered, but hearing the phuff phuff of the railway engine in the distance, he shot off towards the siding two hundred yards away, waving his arm unceremoniously to Lalu the while and calling out, 'Strength of mind is king of qualities, brother. Cheer up and we will soon abolish landlordism.'

Lalu was flabbergasted as he stood watching Sarshar running away. A ridiculous little figure of a man, the comrade seemed to be consumed by the urge to get there, positive and uncompromising and devoted with a demoniac devotion, possessed by some inexplicable quality which raised him above his own diminutive frame, and even above the taller and heftier bodies of others, perhaps a great man, with viscera like everyone else's but with an inner largeness which gripped one and held one, with which he was hammering himself and others into shape, conscious of the mould into which he wanted to cast himself and everyone, almost aware of his gift, as if it were more an achievement than an inheritance.

The train was steaming into Rajgarh station, but Sarshar, too, was not far from the siding and he would make it.

Lal Singh stopped to look for a moment, Sarshar had scrambled agilely up to a compartment and was now waving to him. Lalu waved back and then turned towards Kisan Nagar.

He spat a flocculent spittle to get rid of the rank taste of biri smoke in his mouth. Now that Sarshar had gone, he felt suddenly bereft. The words of the comrade had left him strangely ruffled, irritated and disillusioned, the more because, when shorn of the arrogance of his manner and the hurt of his rebukes, most of what Sarshar had said seemed true enough. Certainly slogans were not everything, as he himself had discovered in

his honest moments. But still he had been possessed by a great many strange, inexplicable feelings and urges in his being which he could not control. Therefore he had tended to drown his mind with easy catchwords and phrases. Perhaps, all the members of the Rajgarh group had been ruining the cause through their own weaknesses. The Count certainly liked to hear his own voice, and his talks with his friends had often been mere exhibitions of his own cleverness. And they had all lacked knowledge of conspiratorial methods and had been too open. . . . To be sure, they should have organized a school for educating kisans, devoted a lot more attention to their paper *Naya Hind*, and contacted other comrades. For there were many things he himself would have liked to have known about the Revolution; and perhaps they would have been able to form a loyal group of revolutionaries less afflicted with their own fears, hopes and anxieties.

'I shall write to Comrade Sarshar to come down again,' he muttered to himself as he turned abruptly from the shadows of the trees on the road into the warm sunshine.

'Comrade Lal Singh, Comrade,' a voice suddenly called from the road. 'You need not dart into the fields as soon as you see me.'

Lalu turned to the road again and saw Mithu, the hero of the trial.

'Whither?' Lalu said airily.

'I came to look for you,' Mithu answered, almost gasping. 'Kanwar Rampal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi Sahib were arrested at Rae Bareilli and are in jail for not obeying the police orders. The policias came to look for you at Kisan Nagar. We told them you had gone to Rajgarh and they have gone there. . . . I came to warn you not to return to Kisan Nagar but go into hiding somewhere.

'Kanwar Rampal Singh, Ram Din and Razwi have been arrested!' Lalu repeated Mithu's words, as if he could not believe this, almost as if he had lost his sight and hearing. And he stood staring at Mithu, smiled embarrassedly, recalled Comrade Sarshar's strictures about the Count's neglect of precautions against the police, and struck his forehead with the palm of his hand.

'If we kisans go and crowd round the jail they will surely release the leaders as they released us at Partabgarh,' said Mithu.

'I am off to Rae Bareilli now,' Lalu muttered impetuously. 'Will you tell my wife that I shall be back to-morrow or the day after and that she is not to worry? The down train will cross the up train in a few minutes.'

'Yes, brother,' Mithu said with joined hands, 'but may we follow you to Rae Bareilli?'

Lal Sing did not answer the request but merely waved his hand in farewell, turned his back and proceeded on his way so as to hide the tears in his eyes. He could already hear the whistle of the down train from the direction of Nanakpur. He ran, more unceremoniously even than Sarshar.

As he boarded the train he realized that he should have stayed to organize the peasants. In fact, he had known it in his bones as he had talked to Mithu. But his vision had been obscured by the impulses which had been urging him to do something to act in the emergency which had arisen; his mind had been blurred by the fumes of anger and excitement that had risen in him, the waves of emotion that had swirled through his body as he had run, till he had almost ceased to think.

Now that he was being carried away irrevocably towards Rae Bareilli, however, he thought of the words of Comrade Sarshar and felt guilty. He was panting for breath and embroiled in a sweat. His throat was parched and his hair dishevelled. Fortunately there were only a few sleepy merchants stretched full-length on the bunks in the compartment, and the darkening twilight hid the thoughts that were colouring his face, against their prying glances.

The engine shrieked suddenly, as if it were challenging the forces of the night in its onrush, and arrested Lalu's thoughts involuntarily with the mysterious doom-like air it spread over the elements.

But, again, he was asking himself why he had not paused to deliberate the whole situation before running away, why

he had not considered the other possibilities. What would happen to all the men who had gathered at Kisan Nagar and what would happen to Maya? It amused him as well as irritated him that all these questions were stampeding through him, chasing each other so fast through his head now, when, a few minutes ago, in the actual momen of decision, he had been dense like a forward-charging bull. Perhaps it was the stubborn hurt pride in which the words of Comrade Sarshar had rankled that had made him so stupid. But ever since he had been demobilized from the army, he had been increasingly on the defensive against other people's words and opinions, more and more on guard against being taken in, listening and considering every matter and endorsing only what he was sure about in the light of the experience he had acquired. For to think for oneself was the only way to encompass one's destiny. Of course, one miscalculated events, committed mistakes. But the very jostling of ideas that kept one's reason at a pitch of feverish intensity increased one's grip on one's destiny, in so for as it freed one's mind. All his young life had been an attempt at achieving this liberty, but he knew the dangers of relapsing into the state of unconsciousness from the moments in which he had accepted the taboos of religion in the village and the ideas of the Sarkar in the Army code, out of sheer laziness. . . . During such moments, thinking had become a strange and unpleasant business. And, after the easy acceptance of one or two of these compromises, he had felt as if he had altogether ceased to be capable of individual judgment. . . . True, it seemed a restful position, to be so bestially secure as to become the vehicle for other men's wills, a wooden toy of fate, or, at the best, an animal lying in its own dung and belching with satisfaction at its own stinking majesty of indifference! . . . But such a state of mind, in which one rejected one's own mind for the mess of pottage of security, had always seemed to him the cowardice of a horde of slaves, who turned their backs on the real, pulsing life, which could only be attained through a complete disregard of all that hindered truth. In this sense Comrade Sarshar seemed to him now to have been more fearless than anyone he had

ever met, and yet, perhaps, he himself had done right not to accept everything Sarshar had said at once.

The gas-jets enclosed within the glass globes adjusted to the ceiling of the compartment glowed brightly as the train progressed into the heart of the countryside, but the brief light of these lamps could not keep back the masses of gloom which were pressing in from every side, almost tangible layers of darkness, which seemed to be enveloping the universe, as if the villages, the train, the men in it were mere unsubstantial nothings in the shadows, meaningless in the face of the elements.

For a moment he sat trembling and alone, contemplating the horror, feeling rootless and utterly alone. This isolation, he knew, was the price he had to pay for abjuring all connection with the false gods of the world, for seeking to speak and act and live by his faith, by the integrity of his knowledge of the peasants' lives, by eschewing all thought of obedience to the Sarkar which ruled the Indian earth, by becoming an agitator, always on the prowl and in danger of being arrested . . . And, for a moment, his heart seemed to ache with fear as if he were aware of some doom, as if he knew that the unscrupulous and the forceful often survived those who revolted. But then he thought of the light in the contortion of Sarshar's face, of the comrade's magnetic power which had seemed to rise above the ludicrous, little consumptive frame, and he shook his head as if to cast off all the doubts and fears that assailed him, and began to mutter to himself, naïvely, 'I suppose, some men have always tried to struggle, to understand life.'

'Are you mad, talking to yourself and disturbing others?' said a small, thin-moustached passenger who was trying to sleep on the next bunk. And he continued suspiciously, 'Conscience is active only when the prison doors are open.'

Lalu suddenly realized that he had been holding a colloquy with himself.

'Only trying to remedy the defects in my own nature, brother, with a little prayer,' he said with a laugh, and settled back.

Deep strata of black night hung down from the sky above the compound of Rae Bareilli station when Lalu emerged from the hall after paying excess to the sallow-faced Eurasian ticket collector. The station clock stood at only half-past eight, yet an air of somnolence spread over this town as if everyone was already asleep or dead.

'Carriage, Huzoor,' a solitary tonga-driver called to him.

'No, brother,' Lalu said, and waved his head in negation, almost apologetically. And he realized finally what he had vaguely apprehended in the train, that he knew no one here, had nowhere to go.

He stood for a moment, almost bewitched by the darkness, dumb and anxious, like a tramp looking for a safe resting-place in the wilds. But a policeman in the hall came round from the carriage stand and looked him up and down. Lalu affected as if he were waiting for someone. The policeman came to a standstill, and began to watch him. So he came down the hall steps and began to walk blindly, exploring the pitch dark atmosphere with every step.

The candle lamps of two yekkas were breathing faintly, giving off aureoles, gleaming like flames in the inner sanctum of a temple. Lalu groped towards the lights with hungry eyes. But before he had gone many steps he splashed into a puddle. He muttered a curse against municipalities and began to walk at a tangent, parallel to the carriage stand. But he now seemed to be entering an arena ankle deep in the manure of horse dung, urine and straw.

'Can you tell me of a resting-place, near here, brothers?' he called to the yekka drivers, who were whispering to each other as they coughed out biri smoke.

'There by the temple is the gateway of Bansi Dhar's serai,' answered one of the drivers.

'Much obliged,' Lalu muttered and proceeded towards the hulk of a lotus temple beyond the railway compound. Soon he could see the outlines of a gateway, shadowed by the culverts of a brick structure, which he guessed was Bansi Dhar's serai.

'Look out, brothers, look out,' he called as he craned his neck forward to imaginary shapes in the cross-roads.

Only a horse snorted back and struck its hoofs on the ground as it pulled at the halter, and a stray bazaar dog yelped as it ran.

Lalu drifted towards the pale glare of a gas lamp which illuminated the cross-roads. Opposite the iron railings of the station-yard stood the cavernous passageway of Bansi Dhar's charity house.

As he drew nearer the giant doors he was assailed by an acrid stench, a mixture of the smell of unwashed bodies, of fried onions, hookah smoke, decaying refuse and burning cow-dung cakes. And there was a swarm of men sprawled about in the dim light, here a little group, wrapped into the folds of a greasy family quilt, surrounded by tin trunks and a motley assortment of bundles; there another group, mostly women, bending over an iron charcoal burner; further, some coolies knotted under cover of homespun sheets, 'sisking' with the cold, and distraught, further still, a group which sat eating in the garish light of a saucer lamp attached to the steaming big plate stall of the potato and gram curry seller, while a row of beggers lined the railings, dribbling over the wooden cups before them as they dozed, or smoking hemp as they exchanged the gossip of the day or flirted with the odd females among them, who were suckling their sleepy children from shrivelled black breasts.

Lalu went over to the potato and gram stall, sat down a little way away from the late diners, ordered two cakes and an anna worth of curry. Hunger and exhaustion were almost driving him crazy as he waited for the stallkeeper to serve him.

Suddenly it occurred to him that it was almost a year ago since he had landed at another awkward time on the railway station of another provincial town, Manabad, and received the impact of that misery and poverty which the 'money famine' had started in India during his absence in the war and which seemed even more intense in the small towns than it was in the villages, because of the migration of the poorest peasants townwards. Something so terrible and catastrophic had happened during the war that though he could not even yet grasp it in

all its immense potentialities, he had known in his bones as soon as he set foot in the country that Hindustan would never be the same as it had been before. . . . And, if he himself had had any hopes of getting promotion in the army or of going home on pension with a grant of land to work on, he had soon known, after the disappointment of that hope, that he could never sit down to accept it all quietly. Since then all his time had been spent in fighting for the peasant's lives, for the hard realities of the straw huts and the beggars on the outskirts of Manabad, the realities of Nandpur and the brutalities of the estates in Oudh. But it seemed from the festering smells, the rags, the shivering, dirty, docile crowd in this passage-way that these realities persisted in spite of his efforts, that nothing seemed to be any good, neither shouting from the housetops nor the rolling up of sleeves in order to brandish a few blows. . . . But, as he was sinking into this despair, he recalled Comrade Sarshar's admonitions about sadness and felt guilty and ashamed.

'Are you asleep, Sahib, here is your food,' called the stall-keeper.

'Oh, yes,' Lalu said, pulling himself together. And he took the leaf pot of potatoes and gram curry with the bread on top and paid the stallkeeper.

The gravy was overflowing the pot and he felt messy as he tore chunks of bread and began to dip them into it. But it was hot and tasty and he swallowed huge mouthfuls.

'Eat till you are full, brother, eat till you bu-r-stt . . .' one of the stallkeeper's customers said drunkenly as he called out a repeat order for himself.

'And d-drink, brother,' said another peasant who sat further ahead, applying a bottle to his mouth.

'Give me a drop, brother-in-law!' the third said, making for the bottle and feeling his friend in the process.

'No, I want to give some to this friend,' the second peasant said.

'You drink, brothers,' Lalu said. 'I am eating.'

'Eat till you are full, brother, eat . . .' the first peasant repeated. 'Eat . . .'

But then, as he was stretching his hand out towards the stallkeeper he suddenly belched a sour breath, involuntarily withdrew both his hands to his expanding ball of a mouth, reeled in an effort to get up and shot out the food he had eaten on his two companions with copious splashings on the stall and Lalu.

'Now you pay for my stall, drunkard!' shouted the stallkeeper. 'Look, I am ruined!'

'No matter, no matter, brother, he is only sick!' said the peasant with the bottle in his hand.

'Only a little too much drink,' said the third peasant consolingly.

'If you drink too much even nectar becomes poison, brother,' said Lalu, nauseated.

'Sahib, he will have to pay for my stall,' whined the stallkeeper.

One of the beggers, who had stood emptying his bladder in the drain by the gateway, came shouting, 'Police, police.'

At this some of the beggars lay down, feigning sleep, while others scurried across the passageway towards the courtyard of the temple, falling over each other and over those who stood in their way. And soon there was a chaos of black scum, upturned chilms, shrieking women, weeping, sleepy children and shouting, cursing men.

Lalu felt his own stomach churning inside him and he stopped eating.

'My stall is completely ruined, oh, my stall!' the stallkeeper was shouting as he sought to put the big plate on a double turban on his head to escape from this pandemonium.

For a moment, Lalu thought of going into the courtyard and hiding somewhere. But then, seeing the stray men stampeding past him he sat indifferently, affecting to eat his food. He felt that there was nothing to choose between the cowardice of the beggars and his own cowardly impulses, and yet he wanted to present a cool front to the police. Somehow, as if the very movement of the down-dragging, lice-ridden, greasy-clothed crowd had stirred all the smells in the corners of the

passageway, Lalu felt a retching in his belly and the water of bile in his mouth.

'Babu, help me to lift this before those demons, the police, come to demand their commission from me,' the stallkeeper was saying after the drunkards had escaped into the dark folds of the courtyard.

Lalu got up to help the stallkeeper.

'Stop where you are, all of you,' a policeman was saying in a deliberate authoritative manner without raising his voice.

Lalu sat down.

'Ah, don't you sit down, my friend,' the policeman said. 'All of you are coming to the lock-up with me. Come, all of you. . . . Thieves! Rogues! Scoundrels!'

'Oh, Maharaj, we haven't done anything!'

'Oh, Sarkar!'

'Oh, father-mother!'

The dishevelled men wept and cried as they knelt or stood with their joined hands uplifted to the policia.

'Chup! Salé! You are always whining!' the policeman said. And he struck his stave on the ground and frightened them into an utter stillness. 'Come, all of you, quietly, to the police station!'

Lalu had already surrendered himself to the will of the policeman in his mind. In that, he thought, lay his only chance of escape from this stupid entanglement.

It happened as he had imagined. For when the men were produced before the sergeant, after they had slept huddled together overnight in a dark but warm lock-up, the police officer just looked them over, bluffed them with a little loud abuse, because some of them whined in abject beggary and terror, questioned them perfunctorily, and then ordered them to be set free.

But as Lalu walked away, after having told the police sergeant that he was only a passenger on his way to Lucknow, he realized that the police had apparently been looking for more dangerous criminals than a mere stallkeeper, the coolies, the stray beggars and the few homeless men whom they had

rounded up, that the sergeant's inquiries about their various businesses were not made with a view to extracting money from *them* by the application of third degree methods, but to elicit information about their political intentions. Immediately he realized this he assumed a more deliberately casual air, and headed towards the railway station.

The morning was well advanced, and even as the town had seemed empty and dead during the previous night is was now full of light and life. The shopkeepers in the railway bazaar were sunning themselves, shaking mats, singing the names of God and calling out to each other, as they scattered the flies from their counters by means of horsehair fans; the tongas and yekkas were jolting across the rutted road, while beggar boys ran behind them singing shrill appeals for charity to the passengers.

Skirting round the crescent-shaped compound of the railway station in order to put any watchful sentry off the scent, Lalu emerged by the big English shops and began to walk blindly in the direction of the Sahib's bungalows, where he guessed the jail would be situated. He dared not stop and ask anyone the way to the jail, because, curiously, there was a bunch of policemen gathered by the railway Octroi Post. . . . He briefly scanned the signpost which read To the Post Office and the P.W.D. Dept., and walked leisurely along, the fine cut of his sports jacket, his shorts and his tennis shoes, disguising him too surely as a broken Sahib like some Eurasian railway employee, who was of no special interest to the law.

Inside himself, however, he felt afraid, like an outlaw. He tried to assure himself that he had committed no unforgivable crime, that he was *only* afraid because he *still* respected the solid, established laws and conventions of the world, that he was forgetting his own mission. But as he consoled himself he was sweating; and he felt that the weakness in his nature was taking him to the ignominious end of his appointed and inevitable destiny.

By the time he had reached the post and telegraph office two furlongs away, he found that his prognostications, and his precautions, had been justified. For another bunch of police-

men stood at the cross-roads, rudely turning back some peasants towards the town.

Affecting the brazenness of the broken Sahib more deliberately than ever, he made straight for the policemen and asked in an anglicized tone:

'What do these people want?'

His heart was beating involuntarily, but he riveted his eyes on the policeman as he stood with his hands on his waist.

'Some of their men are in jail,' one of the policemen answered almost in dialect. 'And they have been gathering for two days round there! Sheep, they come crowding like sheep!'

'Which way is the P.W.D. office?' Lalu suddenly changed the subject.

'There, Huzoor, by the stream, there,' the policeman answered unsuspectingly.

Lalu started off in the direction of the court, relieved that the bluff had worked. But even though he had become steeled through the long distances he had travelled, even though he had become experienced enough to be able to hoodwink the minds of the simple peasantry from which the police was recruited, he could not help shaking. . . . He tried to steady himself by whistling as he gazed at the sunshine which dappled the roadside trees among which the birds were fluttering, and he lifted his head to contemplate the treetops touched with gold.

'Eh, Sahib, Sahib,' one of the policemen called as he came running after him. 'No one is allowed to go that way.'

Lalu pretended to be surprised as he returned.

'Acha, I will telephone,' he muttered exaltedly in broken Hindustani. And he took this occasion of following the peasants who had been turned back.

He walked along quietly, unobtrusively for a while, looking up to the sky, where the sun was playing hide and seek with a few white, scudding clouds. He contemplated the changing power of the light as the orb of brightness disappeared in the shadows or suddenly reappeared and struck his eyes with a

tremendous, blinding glare. He shivered a little as the sun was covered by clouds and the temperature lowered. The peasants on the road, ahead of him, were running or walking briskly along on their bare feet, completely unmindful of the cold. For a revolutionary who was supposed to be tough, he felt an abject little man, utterly ashamed of himself.

He began to walk briskly, jumping over the ruts and puddles in the road. He suddenly felt that if anything in Hindustan was worth agitating for, it was the roads. In the summers they were deep in layers of dust, which burned the eyes, the nose and the mouth like an invisible poison, and in the winters, specially after a shower, their deep pits were full of a murky dough of animal-dung, urine, rubbish and rain-water, over which the beasts of burden slipped. . . . But the fight for municipal rights apart, even the struggle for bread didn't seem to be advancing very far! He must try to contact the peasants who had been turned back by the police, because, now that he was drifting, he felt he had seen some familiar faces in that crowd. . . . But how to do so when there were police pickets at every corner.

Beyond the small church, about three hundred yards away from the post office, the road split into two forks, one leading towards some other fields and the other going straight to where the town of Rae Bareilli began, where strings of coolies bearing loads on their backs were threading past the small, narrow, box structures of shops which were joined to each other almost in continuous rows on both sides, displaying clothes, boots, locks, clocks, shoes, earthenware jars, salt, lentils, rice, screws, medicines, buttons, soaps, beads and all the paraphernalia of civilization.

Lalu had hoped that the peasants would take the fork leading to the fields, but a police sentry barred that way and directed them towards the heart of civilization.

As he came up to the cross-roads, Lalu thought he saw Madhu among the men. He began to run, jostling among the pedestrians and almost trampling on some children who were scuffling like chickens round a hole in the ground by a vegetable stall, playing marbles.

'Come to your senses,' an old woman who sat by the vegetable stall called after him. 'May you die! Trampling on those little ones.'

He turned apologetically, but then ran across the road, heedless and unthinking. But there was not much traffic on this road to-day, and a curious silence enveloped the town though there were quite a few shoppers. He was about to touch Madhu on the shoulder, but the sentries on the fork roads were still moving the peasants on, and he did not know how to speak to the comrade.

Luckily the curses of the vegetable stallkeeper drew the attention of the peasants towards him and one of them recognized him and called to the others:

'Look, Comrade Lal Singh!'

'Come, brothers,' another shouted.

'Oh, Comrade Sahib, it is a good thing you have come,' said Madhu as he ran up. 'These be men from Nanakpur who came to Kisan Nagar yesterday. Raghu, Sukhua, Mithu walked ahead of us in the night and are on the other side of the river with the kisans. The police won't let them cross the bridge to go to the jail. We entered the town by another way, but we have been turned back by the police there, too. They say Pandit Jawaharlal is coming to Rae Bareilli. So we thought we would wait in the bazaar till his train comes.'

'Comrade Lal Singh ki jai!' some of the struggling peasants shouted as they came up to him.

'Chup,' Lalu said, raising his arm to silence them. And he continued: 'There is police on the entrance to the station. You had better not wait about here. Try to get to the comrades on the other side of the river by some other way.'

But he had hardly finished giving them the directions, when the policemen on the fork roads came with lifted staves, like cowherds trying to move the cattle on.

Lalu dodged by a pedestrian and began to run.

Some hidden reaction of self-preservation, arising from the experience of the previous night, had made him take to his heels, some deep-seated feeling of being hunted, that had lain

dormant in him for years, had driven him, some unconscious fear had caught him like an invisible contagion from the police-ridden atmosphere of Rae Bareilli. But as soon as he realized the stupidity of this reaction he slowed his pace. Only, behind him now, the policemen were shouting, 'Pakro! Pakro! Catch him!'

The bazaar led straight to another cross-roads, where he would be caught even if he escaped his pursuers, but on the left of him, between two houses, was a waste land overgrown with tall grasses and enclosed between a low brick wall, apparently the site for a new building, which backed on to the fields.

Lalu turned and scaled the wall and found himself stumbling headlong into a marsh. The grass was very wet and he felt the water oozing about his shoes. He remembered how suddenly and deftly he had taken this bold leap and he was sure the policemen would be running ahead towards the next cross-roads if they hadn't seen him. But he wanted to wait for a moment and see. So he crouched in the mud, the scum dripping from his shins and disturbing the curious silence that lay on the waste ground.

'Pakro! Pakro!' the policemen were shouting as they raced along. And then there was a prolonged hush, as if it were all a dream. The policemen seemed to have passed on. He cursed himself for having done what he had done, and felt an irresistible impulse to go back and face the policemen. 'After all, I have committed no crime,' he muttered to himself. But he heard the rap rap of a lathi charge and someone crying out as if in pain. . . . And then only silence and the thumping of his heart. He decided to wait. . . .

After a few minutes of quiet he knew that he had put the police off the scent and that he could escape from the odorous marsh. He wanted, now that he had taken such leaps in the dark, as it were, to try and get to the peasants, who, Madhu had told him, were gathered beyond the river outside Rae Bareilli. He thought he would get into the open fields, ford the stream and join the crowd. For the police could hunt down isolated individuals and even shoot at a stray person,

but they could not do anything to a crowd except drive it away with lathis — because they wouldn't even have room for a thousand peasants in the jail.

Unsteadily he rose to his feet and peeped across the low brick wall. The bazaar seemed to have been suddenly emptied and a strange hush seemed to have spread, as if the spirit of violence had emerged from that lathi charge, with that agonized cry, and now lay like an air of oppression and death on everything, crushing all life and movement.

He looked down at his feet — they were scarcely visible in the mud-bespattered shoes. He suddenly noticed that the palm of his left hand was grazed and bleeding, though he did not know when it had happened, because he had felt no pain. . . . He looked about himself again. . . . And then the question occurred to him how he should cross the ground. Terrified, he listened intently for a moment. All was quiet. He decided he would creep along, hugging the skirt of the wall.

He started off slowly across the grass, his feet squelching in his shoes, his lithe, muscular body stooping forward, his shoulders hunched. He recalled how he used to play hide and seek with his mother as a child in the courtyard of his father's haveli at Nandpur. What a long time it seemed now? And how happy he had been as a child! And could he have forseen then that he would end up as a worm, a thief, hiding from the police? . . .

But he must pull himself together if he was going to face the peasants. And, at all costs, he must not be killed as a poor, weak cowardly little animal. . . .

Not a sound came across the wall, but he had yet three hundred yards to go to get to the other side. The sun's glare was sucking up the damp and a thin mist seemed to rise among the stunted bushes. But there was no possibility for cover further ahead. . . .

He lifted his head slightly and explored the ground. Suddenly he saw a bania relieving himself behind a rubbish dump, while he held an end of his loin cloth on his nose to ward off the smells in one hand and a brass kettle in another. He

smiled with the resurgence of the child in him who would have thrown a stone at the moneylender. It would be a wonderful ruse, he thought, to simulate the shopkeeper. . . . So he sat down, took a broken earthen jug which those who came to relieve themselves here apparently used in common, and then got up pretending to pull up his shorts and began to walk across the ground.

'Ram Ram!' he greeted the bania mischievously.

The merchant was taken aback and almost fell forward as he nodded.

Lalu could not help smiling at this ridiculous accident, but he strove eagerly forward, as if the discomfiture of the merchant had given him added assurance to face the police. . . . 'I will walk along now as though nothing had happened,' he muttered to himself. 'And when . . .' Suddenly he stopped, and put his hand to his ear. . . . Two lorries full of soldiers were racing down the road. He ran up to the wall and saw one more lorry following the others. That was apparently where the peasants were,—perhaps, in imminent peril. There was an aperture in the walls and he walked out of the compound with the earthen jug still in his hand. . . .

After a short spell of the road, he dived into the premises of an Octroi post, and tried to work his way towards the objective of the lorries by a detour through a half-finished thoroughfare, bordered by rows of tumbledown old coolie huts, covered by thousands of ragged jute-cloth hangings, frayed by the sun. He could smell the sharp burning smell of mustard oil in which the poor were frying their bread. He felt the pangs of hunger reach up to the corners of his mouth, for he had not eaten a square meal for almost two days now.

But then he thought of the greasy, sickly bread, fried in oil, nauseated him, specially as he felt the festering smell of drying cowhide assailing his nostrils. . . . A little further the smell of leather seemed to mix with a more pungent odour as of a liquor factory, an unbearable stench. He did not know how human beings could live within range of such odours. He wondered if there were any political agitators in Rae Bareilli,

who were organizing the coolies. He would have liked to have stopped here to talk to the men. But those peasants who had marched up, who were almost halfway on the road to the recognition of their plight and believed in action, were ahead. He must hurry.

He edged away and darted into a corn field. The sun was hot overhead now, but a cool breeze was blowing and scattering the mist. He ran through the fields with the old agility of the peasant in him. He felt thrilled by the curious resurgence of the memories of other hot noon tides, when the clouds had scurried to and fro and the warm scents of corn and grass had come like light and laughter, and the festival of spring had not seemed too far away . . .

For a while, the field seemed endless, an ocean of oats and wheat stalks, swaying gently in the dazzling brightness of the sun, in a silence made the more uncanny by the rustling of the vegetation. He stopped and looked around in a burning suspense. Almost utter silence. . . . And the shimmering sheen was blinding him. . . . Suddenly he put his hand to his ear. Beyond the edge of the fields, on the road which ran parallel with the bed of the stream, was a confusion of sounds, like shouted orders, sharp and clear as on a parade ground. This was followed by a hush. . . . Then he could hear the tramp-tramp of marching soldiers' feet, the ring of which was so familiar to him from his army days. . . . Halt and silence again. . . . One, two, three. . . . The men were numbering off. . . .

He felt his heart palpitate and his breath come and go rapidly as he waited. He realized how tall the corn was, and how completely it hid him from the outside world, between the blue sky and red brown earth. But with every breath of the fresh morning air he realized how hungry he was and felt his legs beneath him breaking. . . . In order to prevent himself from collapsing, he began to walk. At all costs he must get to his comrades. . . .

He stepped warily as he got nearer and nearer the road, stooping, bending, almost crawling, where the corn lost height. And then, before he had got to the edge of the field, he

paused. . . . He lifted his head a little to survey the ground. . . . Suddenly, to the left of him on this side of a bridge, he could see tall bearded Sikh and Punjabi Mussalman soldiers, with long 'turrad' turbans, standing in compact groups, like a platoon of his own regiment in the war, cast on a screen before him, as it were, huge and menacing, guns in their hands, the buttons of their uniforms and the tips of their bayonets glinting bright-eyed at the sun. . . . A shouted order, and, curiously, he who had once been a soldier and known how inept and awkward and human soldiers were, now felt dwarfed and frightened of this detachment. . . .

There was a thud-thud at the back of his head and he was gasping for breath as he waited to decide what to do; the dumb longing to be straight and direct was almost goading him into the arms of the military, but his fear drew him away, and decided him to ford the stream.

He crawled like a giant snake through the last stems on the field and darted across the road. He was breathless. If he was seen thus he would certainly be shot. . . . But he had escaped down a gradient which ended in a gully. . . . With his life in his mouth, his heart beating, his head throbbing, he paused. Then he crawled down to the edge of the stream and, without a thought, buried his burning face in the coolness of the water, drinking huge mouthfuls and belching in spite of himself.

As he raised his head he had a blurred vision of white-tuniced men running from the other side of the bridge, waving their hands and calling, 'Comrade Lal Singh! Comrade Lal Singh!' They were only a stone's throw away and yet they seemed to be merely far-off voices, as they rushed from the opposite fields, spreading over the undulating country, rushing like madmen touched by the sun, with wild and enthusiastic gestures. And some of them were already wading the stream to come to him. He stared hard at the welcoming mass and thought he saw Raghu splashing the water as he came running in shallow water, assembling his loin cloth with one hand, and beckoning the peasants after him with the other. . . .

Lalu got up and waved furiously to them, shouting, 'Go back, go back,' as his mouth dripped with the water.

There was a shouted order from the side of the bridge where the soldiers were stationed. Silence. . . . Some thudding footsteps, the well-known tramp-tramp of hobnailed boots. . . . And then a volley of shots rang out.

The figures ahead of the crowd in the stream screamed and fell, followed by other screaming, shrieking, tottering men.

There was another shouted order and another volley, and the man on the banks of the stream fell, like roasted gram in the cauldron.

Lalu saw them turn, scamper, run and fall, rise again and totter. . . . He heard them shrieking with pain and terror, falling as they were running towards him. . . . His mind was numbed and he merely watched as if he were the detached spectator of stars breaking on the horizon in some dark night which had suddenly engulfed the world. . . .

He would show himself and surrender. Then the soldiers would cease shooting. Or he would call out and assure the military, beg them, pray to them to spare the men. . . . But he could not utter a sound as he opened his mouth. . . . His legs were shaking underneath him; he didn't know whether to advance into the stream or to go up the hill. . . .

But before he had even decided to move, another volley of shots rang out above him, terrifying in their sharpness. . . . Silence . . . the vacancy of death. . . .

Then the shouts of the sepoys filled the air: 'Rape the mother of him whoever it is! Rape his mother! Kill him!'

Perhaps they had seen him. . . . A horde of rushing feet. . . . He must not run at any cost. He must master himself . . . . control, only control his trembling frame. . . . 'Oh, mother, oh, mother,' he murmured. . . . 'Give me strength. . . Oh. . .'

And he passed his hand over his face to prevent the darkness of a swoon from covering his face. . . .

'There he is, the bastard!' someone was shouting.

From the other side of the river the smell of charred flesh came stinging him, clinging to him in huge drops of sweat.

'Come, brothers, I am ready to surrender,' he said. 'Come,

brothers,' he gasped, as he stood poised in the shimmering air. . . .

IX

After they had been formally charged in the hall of the local jail, Lal Singh and the peasants, who had been arrested after the shooting, were crowded into the barrack cells, enclosed within the tall mud walls of the prison, and kept there with other convicts, pending trial.

The rapid succession of the events of the past few days, and the shock of the tragedy at the riverside, left Lalu feelingless in the way in which fresh wounds leave the stricken body. He felt numb. And a strange kind of apathy spread over him as he brooded in the congested dormitory, which rang with the copious abuse of the long-term convict-warders and which stank with the urine pails placed at intervals between the mud bunks on which the prisoners slept. And it seemed to him, as he sat wrapped in a blanket in the chilly autumn evenings on his hard raised platform, secured against movement by bar fetters through the ankle rings of which passed a chain connecting him to the criminals on the other bunks, that all was over, that the whole struggle had ended with the stern warning which the sepoys' bullets had given to the peasants as they tried to cross the river.

And yet the cankar of resentment in him persisted and he was heavy with a fever of thoughts and dreams. . . .

As he was put to the job of rope-making during the days, the hours of light seemed less cruel than the night, except that the monotony of twisting rope and of eating two ladlefuls of lentils and some half-baked chapatis every day created a sense of torpor and ennui. And, as it went on from day to day, without the date of the trial being fixed, the routine of this senseless life became a long-drawn torture. His back was stiff with the impact of the mud bunk, and he could neither stand nor sit nor lie down without feeling that his bones were sticking

out of him. His hands were like horny claws with the rubbings of jute and the muscles of his arms were stiff. The several days' growth of beard on his face and the lengthening of his hair made him look like the Sikh he would have been if he had never had his ritualistic hair cut before the war. And he felt himself fast disintegrating to a sub-human state where thinking tended to be a difficult process, degenerating into superstition, especially when he wanted to dig into his mind for the reasons of his own and the peasants' failure.

One day, however, after the evening roll call, one of the assistant jailers took him aside and told him that a wire had arrived from Musamat Maya Devi saying that a son had been born to her.

'Are you the father, oh bey swine?' the assistant jailer asked. 'When are you going to treat us to sweets?'

Lalu merely grinned, embarrassedly.

'Illegally begotton, we are not your servants that we should give you news without some remuneration! You come to the office to-moorrow and dictate a letter to her and ask her to send us some money for transmitting this message!'

As Lal Singh kept silent, the jailer ordered him to get back into the line and departed after casting a cursory glance at the prisoners.

This news seemed to shock Lal Singh back into an awareness of himself and of the responsibility he owed to the woman he had left behind him. The thought of the child, born a little prematurely, for it was not due for two months yet, gnawed into him, since it was presumably the activity of the day on which they were evicted from Rajgarh that had brought on Maya's labour. And that night his anxiety for the mother and the child became a guilty thief, gnawing into his vitals, until all the thieves of his past defaults, all the worms of doubt and disillusionment arose and assailed him, racking his brain and controlled only by the eye of the present which seemed to look back over the whole of his life in its successive stages.

'Do not go, my love, do not go,'

the haunting refrain of the song of the seasons which Maya used to sing echoed in his ears with its terrible poignant air, the associations of the seasons, discoloured by memories of his early shrill urges, the nostalgic regrets of each of its phases violated by the long effort of his youth to control his destiny, the whole poignant appeal of it, the burden of its insistence on private, homely joys, negated by the desperate struggles which he had waged with others to exact from their enemies the hard fruits of their toil. . . .

It seemed a long time ago, though it was barely five or six years, when he had gone to Manabad for the festival of lanterns:

> 'The festival of garlands of lamps such as the nights
> wear,
> And when cities are gay. . . .'

On the top of the landlord's hay cart, Maya had appeared to him as a beloved. And he had sought to build his home in her eyes, reaching out to happiness with all the wild enthusiasm of his nature. But, after the brief joys of the fair, among the throngs of peasants, the rattling carts, the roving beggars, the moving cattle, the bargaining banias and the clouds of dust, after the exhilaration of having his ritualistic hair shorn in defiance of his family and the teaching of the tenth Guru, after the brief twilight decorated with burning lamps had come disillusionment. . . . This violation of the taboo had started him on the road of grim experience — this and the love of Maya. 'No red clothes,' said the villagers, 'only yellow ones.' And they had blacked his face and put him on a donkey when he got home. . . . They were all for clipping the wings of the young. And they bickered with each other while the landlord was looting their land and that flea Chaman Lal was defrauding them of their hoarded gold. . . . Perhaps he had been in too great a hurry and, also perhaps, he had cared more about his wounded vanity than anything else, going about like a long-faced boor when he might have passed the donkey ride off as a joke. . . . Then the landlord had brought

a false charge of theft against him and he had run and joined the army. . . .

> 'Do not go, my love, do not go,
> The winds of home are free, my love,
> The shades of home are cool . . .'

How ironical was Maya's plaint when it was her father who had turned him out on the road!

And, oh, the headstrong, cocksure self-will of youth! For he had blamed the village folk for extracting pain out of him, when they could no more help their scruples under the benign rule of the Sarkar than they could give up the habit of relieving themselves behind the five clumps of bushes by the walls of the monastery, or fighting each other over a trickle of water! . . . The millions of the petty peasant proprietors were already living under the shadow of a blight which was spreading over the countryside, unknown to them, through the superior buying power of Harbans Singh's wealth, through the money that Chamuna and the contractor Bhagwan Das had piled up with interest on the never-never-to-be-payable debt, through forced sales and distraints on the strength of which factories were being set up! . . .

How touching had his father Nihalu seemed to him as he lay sick the last time he, Lalu, had visited Nandpur before the war! How the old man had talked of his own military prowess in the wars against the ferungis, of the family acres and the harvest he had raised on them! How he had mumbled prayers, poured curses and shrill, hysterical abuse on the Sarkar, the landlord and the moneylender! And now he had been dead many years, that fiery spirit! . . .

But death seemed repulsive and ominous to him in the darkness of the night as he lay motionless on his bunk. So he turned his head away impatiently from the souvenirs of his youth before the memory of his doting mother could assail him. The fetters of a convict on his right were clanking against the chain as the man was adjusting himself into a position to empty his bladder. He seemed to be suffering from some kidney trouble, as he had repeated the same per-

formance five or six times since the nightly roll-call. Some of the other convicts were muttering abuse, others were clearing their throats noisily. But the warder shouted from outside:

'Sleep, sleep, silence!'

Lalu tried to sleep. But the kidney-trouble convict had started a series of disturbances all over the dormitory: here a groan, there a growl of impatience, further a clanking of the chains. And all the fibres of Lalu's body seemed to be bursting with exasperation. . . . . The warder, outside, repeated his orders, but the convicts still burr-burred. . . . If only they would stop, he could sleep. . . . A little later he tried to accept it all. But now someone else was getting up to make water. . . The warder shouted again, shrilly, finally:

'Sleep, illegally begotten, sleep!'

'A dough lamp: put it inside, the rats will eat it; put it outside, the crows will carry it away.' That was the convicts' lot. . . . It had been the same in the army. The Sarkar left the sepoy or the prisoner no choice. As Uncle Kirpu used to say, 'a sepoy's first duty and the last is to obey.' And the Lance Naik or the warder, the doots of hell, where always there to push the bayonet into a man's backside and to enforce discipline! . . . .

He felt his body getting inert. His temples were throbbing with a dull ache. He shivered a little and assembled his blanket close round him. . . .

> 'Do not go, my love, do not go,
> The nights are dark and cold . . . .
> In the month of Poh. . . .'

It had been like this in the war, in the barns and the Francisi farmhouses and in the trenches, dank and close, with the reek of urine, and with the heaps of bleary, worm-eaten humanity, shivering and lousy. And, oh, those months of senseless murder of Messines and Festubert! And after passing through the various cold hells and the hot hells, after going through the Mahabharat, with Daddy Dhanoo drowned, Havildar Lachman Singh killed, Uncle Kirpu a suicide, Rikhi

Ram and Dhayan Singh sacrificed to Kali, after the long waiting in the German prison camp, while the rival Sarkars seemed to be engaged in slow attrition — well, he could not believe that that struggle was all over, so suddenly had it ended! . . . Nor could he believe that he had been in another struggle which had now landed him into another hell!

He felt himself gazing at the old scene of barbed wire and corpses and then he looked at the bodies about him, calmly, almost as if his old self had died, as if he had no connection with the past, as if he wanted to forget. . . . He recalled that he had often felt he had died in the war, as if something in him had snapped. And he had wanted to go away to the Himalayas to forget, to purify himself in Sanyas. For the war was a dividing-line between his old self and the new self which he had become, as the shooting at the river was a dividing-line between the bad comrade he had been and the newer, wiser self he had hoped to be.

'Why had a whole generation been wiped off the surface of the earth?' he mumbled to himself impatiently as he had often done before. 'Why were there food riots in Germany? What had happened to the square of land I was promised by the Sarkar? And why was I demobilized? Why the money famine? . . . Why was the speculation in Bombay not stopped and why was the blood money of contractors not taxed? Why the scarcity, the restlessness, the uncertainty in Vilayat as well as in Hindustan? . . . What is the destiny of man and how can I control it? Why is it that after a long time of struggle, after all the stress, after all the efforts I made to cure the defects of my own nature, going deeper than all my deepest discoveries, on guard against being taken in, listening and considering every matter and endorsing only what I was sure about in the light of my experience, after seeking to grapple with my own destiny and that of others with a devotion even like that of the religious devotee, Dayal Singh — why is it that I have ended up in this reeking hell, scratching my head, tossing restlessly from side to side? . . .'

A tremor of self-pity went through him after this whimpering harangue. And he felt alone and neglected, a moral leper

and almost cried out: 'Horror! Ohe Doohai!' For bitter, like the hunger of the empty belly, and sweet is the ache of the stricken soul which makes a God of reason, which denies power, spits on glory, eschews all contact with wealth, which even turns cold and loveless from mother, wife and brother, and strives towards the perfection of a new way of living, a way of giving oneself in a new manner, which seeks to be a light, a flame, which strives to mould life according to a new conception of human truth and justice, to a new ideal of thought and beauty. . . .

The acrid stench of the convicts' unwashed bodies made the air soporific, so that he could hear a few prisoners snore and felt himself lapsing, as if sympathetically, to a state where the things of sense and thought seemed to melt, beckoning his softly whispering mind to sleep. . . .

There was the sheen of a rich gold dust on Maya's wheat-blonde oval face as she came with her child in her arms, almost like Bibi Miriam, the Goddess of the Essaees of his Church Mission School days, though her almond eyes slanted more pointedly like a harlot's and her whole manner bespoke the maturity of a woman: walking magnificently and calmly, she advanced with other harlots, who seemed to emerge from behind the trees in the valley, and new leaves blossomed on the earth where their feet fell. . . . For a moment he wanted to rub his eyes, to see clearly, to recognize her. But even against his will, his desire was leading him close to her, his fece tingling with passion, his breath coming and going quickly, his body quivering all over. . . . Suddenly, he had embraced her. A fiery blast seemed to go through his heart. He did not know what had come upon him. . . .

He awoke from the torpor almost as if he were shrivelling with thirst. The dream still filled him. So he touched himself, stifled on his mud bunk to recognize where he was. He felt he had almost been in some other place, become another person. . . . Bibi Miriam! And Maya a harlot! . . . He could not recognize the features of the child in her arms though he knew it was his own son.

He lay in a sort of sweat, making no attempt to move because the warder outside was shouting:

'Sleep, sleep, illegally begotten! What has happened to you to-night?'

On his right-hand side the convict with the kidney trouble was stirring again, while others snored and talked in their sleep and beetles cried in some far-away corner of the jail, cries of hunger and loneliness. He half opened his eyes and cast a baffled glance towards the doorway to see what hour it could be. But the atmosphere was dark and grey, and his eyes blinked and closed in a half-sleep envenomed by the assurance of that tune whose sadness derided the peace of his mind.

'Do not go, my love, do not go,
The nights are dark and long,
And I am shivering with the cold.

Do not go, my love,
Hold my hands in thine and make them warm, my love,
Do not go in the month of Poh . . .'

And he had left her alone for months, not even desired her. And now the dumb longing in his soul had entwined with all the other regrets to leave him pain-marred, mutilated, behind the bars. . . .

'How could I have avoided this defection when I wanted to give myself to her as well as to others?' he murmured, and started that colloquy with himself into which he seemed always to fall so imperceptibly in his fear and uncertainty. 'Perhaps I have been a traitor to her and to everything else. . . .'

So involved had he become in things outside himself, he argued, however, as he turned on his side, that he could not easily relate himself to his feelings about Maya, but only to the Revolution. For she had seemed a hindrance in the way of his work, a responsibility of the desires of those days when he still selfishly wished for his own happiness and sought to master his destiny by harnessing a little land so that he could drive his bullock-cart through the world, which seemed to exist as something outside him to be exploited for his own pur-

poses. But having discovered a cause in which he could believe, having lived and worked for himself as well as for others, for the peasants, his brethren, striving to root out evil, fighting all those who hindered their lives, he had been impatient with her because he had seen in her many of his own impulses to flourish of his adolescence, his own weaknesses, his own confusions, vanities and vapidities. . . .

'Two or three things were in my mind to say to you
And I could not even say those to you.
The things in my heart remained in my heart, oh, my Comrade. . . .'

He hummed another tune in his parched throat. . . . A convict belched gas, and he could not help laughing. But a warder shouted: 'Die salé, filthy wretch!' and struck the butt end of his rifle on the outer wall of the dormitory. Then followed sporadic comment, curses, undertones of abuse, and the shuffling of many forms. And the fellow with the kidney trouble seemed to be making new efforts to use the pail.

Immediately Lal Singh was seized with a sudden urge to speak to the convicts, to tell them in the loudest voice of the agitator to rally round him and fly, escape from this hell in which they were enclosed as if before the Judgment day. 'Docile, outraged brothers, life's riff raff, beaten and fleeced,' he wanted to say, 'come, let us make another effort to destroy these who do not love us. We failed because we had not changed, because our habits, ideas, opinions were narrow and contained within the circle of Kisan Nagar, because neither our leaders nor we ourselves knew what all our other brothers were doing—those brothers who have ended up from the four corners of India in the mills and factories, escaping from hunger, pestilence and cold into long hours, dirt and disease. We followed the shadow and forgot the substance. Come, worthy little people, come, we will now make a real Revolution! Come, we shall work day and night and learn how to make a Revolution. . . .' But his romantic gestures seemed absurd in the cage. . . . So he sat up suddenly, coughed and cleared his throat of the phlegm, and tried to calm himself.

'Two things were in my mind to say to you. . . .'

the new refrain recurred.

He hugged the end of his knees in his arms, ducked his face into the pit before his chest for a while and murmured, as if in prayer, to Maya, perchance she could hear.

'Two, three things were in my heart, oh, my comrade.'

'As the bhagats, the devoted ones in the past, those who practised the "at your service" ideal of our religion, so we have to give, give, give of ourselves. For he who gives himself to the service of others is blessed, is enriched. . . .

'And once one has made up one's mind to give, once one has devoted oneself to others, one must learn to master oneself, to discard one's family and caste egoism, to banish all the lies of religion and to break the narrow walls which separate man from man. . . .

'For Revolution is a need of togetherness, Comrade, the need to curb malice among men, the need for men to stand together as brothers. . . .

'There has been no time like the present, my darling, no such unrighteousness that hundreds and thousands of men in our land should be mortgaged up to their loin cloths, that almost every mud hut, every fruit tree, every bedstead and every bullock should be mortgaged, while in the houses of the landlords stand milch cows, fine bulls, red calves, white horses and granaries well stocked. . . .

'And it is strange, nay shameful, sweetheart, that for years we have lived with our mouths agape, while the authorities have come mocking at us, writing words of advice on our walls, that our lands have been bleached, while we have not even had the money to buy seed. . . .

'"Two, three things were in my heart to say to you, Comrade. . . ."

'You who have never known hunger, cold and loneliness were always calling me back, Comrade, you were always remonstrating,

'"Do not go, do not go, my love. . . ."

'But it is only after the fight against those who enslave, Comrade, only after the struggle for the new way of life, that we shall rest and sing of the seasons. . . . Now is the time to learn the ways of struggle, my love, now is the time to live in and through the struggle. . . . Now is the time to change the world, to fight for Life and happiness; now is the time to sing, Comrade, brave songs of the struggle. . . .

'Oh, do not look so sad, my love; look up, sweetheart, look up, this is no time for sadness, but for struggle and for happiness. . . .

'Come, Comrade, we must do something. . . .'

The warder in the hall of the jail struck five strokes on the gong. The convicts stretched their bodies and groaned and yawned, while the convict warders began to pace up and down the dormitory, shouting:

'Awake, awake, get ready for the roll-call!'

Lal Singh lifted his head and saw the new dawn filtering through the doorways with that uncanny milk-white radiance which heralds the coming of a strong sun. The moist smell of the dew blew into the corners of the dormitory, freshening his limbs after the stench, the fatigue and the irritations of the night. The cocks in the jailer's house crowed; some sparrows stirred in the trees outside the dormitory and began to chirp; a few parrots began to talk eagerly as if getting ready to fly to distant gardens te collect the day's food.

The warder's calls multiplied.

Lalu felt easier now that the night was over. He rubbed his eyes and stared about him. He must get ready for the day. He must remember to send a message to Maya to ask her how their new-born son was getting on, though from her answer to his previous inquiries during her pregnancy, he knew what she would say:

'Sardar Lal Singh, your child is alive and kicking!'

(London — ~~Devon: July~~ 1940 — January, 1941.)